CLEOPATRA

HENRY · GRÉVILLE

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CLEOPATRA

BY

HENRY GRÉVILLE

Author of "Dosia's Daughter," etc.

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CHAPTER I.

A WEDDING.

THE lights were being rapidly put out in the church of Saint Serge at St. Petersburg, though the last wedding guests had not yet reached their carriages; but nothing disappears more promptly than illuminations that have been ordered for a festive occasion.

It would seem as if it was the business of sextons and beadles to make one feel how fleeting are marriage joys.

The wedded pair were already far away. The first to set out in the nuptial carriage, they had flown with the speed of race-horses, leaving their *cortége* behind them.

According to custom they were received at the threshold of the princely residence by the distinguished woman, who, on this occasion, acted the part of *mère d'honneur*. Aided by her nephew, a boy of ten years, who wore an *icône*, richly trimmed with gold and precious stones, she im-

posed upon them the indispensable benediction, and offered them bread and salt served upon a plate of gold, — emblems of prosperity.

Then the hero of the fête entered the apartments, and for about sixty seconds Prince Charamirof was allowed to gaze upon his young wife.

She was indeed very young — blonde, frail, pretty, and made to be petted.

"At last, Irene, you are mine!" cried the happy spouse.

The darling little wife smiled with an air at once happy and shy.

Already, while in the carriage that conveyed them to their dwelling, he had indulged in a thousand tender and bewildering expressions; but here in his home! — was it true that it was to be hers also?

She blushed to the very tips of her little ears, but before she could reply there were heard in the vestibule the rustle of heavy silks and the clinking of spurs.

The bridal pair, standing at the door of the first salon, received their guests.

It was a noble residence, worthy of the historic name it bore.

The Charamirofs belonged to an ancient line of nobility and fortune.

But this last scion of an aristocratic family, what had he done but fall in love with a little girl without a penny, — pretty (as all agreed), but with very awkward, provincial manners, and who was only

just out of the *Institut* for the daughters of the nobility at Kazan?

If she had only been educated at St. Petersburg! But no! "Province! Province!" was cried on all sides. "And awfully provincial at that."

And this audacious Charamirof, had he not profited by the friendship that the Grand Duke Boris had extended to him (he was his aid-de-camp) to ask that his wife's sister, the beautiful Cleopatra, might be appointed maid-of-honor to the empress? And he had secured the appointment.

There are certain people who are sure of everything. "It is precisely because they look for everything that they get everything," came from a lisping voice behind the Countess Baroussief, who chanced to think aloud as she ascended the steps.

The countess looked around, — it was her old enemy, Trédine, who was following her.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, not being accustomed to encourage familiarities; and the gayly apparelled crowd, — a stream of changeable silks and priceless laces, bedizened with aiguilletes, studded with diamonds — the breasts of the men as well as the heads of the women, — this throng of friends and enemies that escorts every newly married couple, entered the grand parlors, flooded with light and carpeted with the choicest flowers.

Words, salutations, smiles, hidden railleries, (others brazen-faced), phrases of exquisite gallantry, insolence that elsewhere might provoke a slap in the face, — all drowned in official polite-

ness that could deceive no one, and uttered with a dry joke so artlessly expressed that it was impossible to discover where compliments ended or satire began.

In a word it was the usual accompaniment of a large and brilliant reunion in a brilliant salon at St. Petersburg, under the reign of Emperor Nicholas.

Such was the marriage reception given by Prince Charamirof.

The Grand Duke Boris just dawned upon the scene, and then withdrew. Some approved of it, others criticised it; and an hour after his departure the sumptuous residence was deserted.

Only Madame Bakhtof and her niece Cleopatra lingered near the new princess.

"Thanks, aunt," said the latter, drawing off her gloves with a self-possessed air; "you have been a mother to me since Pacha and I were orphans, and I bless you for it with all my heart. Be sure I shall never forget it."

Madame Bakhtof looked at her niece, slightly bewildered. Her tone, so free from embarrassment, was unlike the ordinary simple sweetness of the young girl. "And you, Pacha, you know you will always have a room here with us; and when we return from our wedding journey, if you will come for a month, I am sure it will afford the prince as much pleasure as myself."

Cleopatra did not evince as much surprise as her aunt, but she replied by a bow of the head, as haughty as the words she had heard.

"My dear sister-in-law," said the prince, who entered at this moment, having just seen his last guest depart, "there is no need to assure you that this house is yours, and that I am your most devoted servant."

"Thank you, prince," said Cleopatra, whose beautiful face blushed deeply at these words, which, in reality, resembled the words of her sister, though different in form.

"Prince? Say brother, my dear sister. Are you going, aunt?"

"God bless you, my children!" said Madame Bakhtof.

"Thanks, aunt," responded the newly wedded pair with one voice.

The sisters kissed each other; and the prince gallantly kissed the hand, first of his aunt, and then of Cleopatra.

The ladies directed their steps towards the stairway. Glancing back they saw the married couple, — the prince, with his arm encircling the waist of his young wife, was gently leading her across the large room to the interior apartments situated at the extremity of the vast mansion. A sigh fell from the lips of Madame Bakhtof; she, too, had been young and loved.

The day of her marriage had been for her a complete blossoming-out, — a divine joy, participated in by both friends and neighbors, as far as she was able to cause it to be so.

"Now things are different. It is no longer the

fashion to be sweet and gentle when one is happy."

The carriage conducted her home, together with Cleopatra, who, in waiting the return of the bridal pair, was to reside with her aunt. As the nimble trotters approached the steps of her house, of which the ladies occupied the third floor, the good aunt said to her niece: —

"I hope, Cleopatra, that ere long you will marry as well as your sister; I shall then die in peace."

"Do not be anxious about that," replied the beautiful girl.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE LOOKING-GLASS.

MADAME BAKHTOF retired to her chamber, and sought her bed, — not to sleep, but to weep.

Every one knows that when the heart is full the bed suggests itself as a refuge, and the most natural place where one may give full vent to tears.

She had loved her husband, and lost him when very young, ere he had time to give her any cause for sorrow. Consequently she had the right, after every nuptial ceremony, to revive these souvenirs, mingled with a little melancholy.

Cleopatra had entered the large room, which for about six months she had shared with her sister, but which henceforth she was to occupy alone.

It was lighted by two windows that were hung with white muslin curtains, very ugly and perfectly useless; but it was the custom at that time that a young girl's room should be provided with white muslin curtains. Two calico shades, also white and equally indispensable, softened a little the crude light from without, and served to protect the apartment in the evening from any curiosity that might arise in the house across the way. Within, upon the sill of these great double win-

dows, some green plants outlined their capricious curves against the panes.

A toilet-table, veiled in muslin, with a classical under-dress of some sort of rose-colored calico, was furnished with an oval mirror of moderate dimensions.

Different articles necessary to a toilet, some in silver, others in glass, of antique form, threw a little brilliancy into this scanty interior.

Two little iron beds, without springs, with nothing but thin mattresses spread upon strips of board, occupied the two principal walls.

The eyes of Cleopatra, still filled with the splendors of Charamirof's house were fixed with a look of utter disgust upon the gloomy and displeasing objects before her. It was there that she had passed three years of her life, poor and unnoticed, in spite of her loveliness; it was there, lying upon a bed that would have stiffened the joints of any one but a Russian, accustomed from infancy to such hygienic servitude, that she had listened, for the last two months, till far into the night, to her sister's wakeful dreams, from whom sleep had fled since she had been engaged to the handsomest, richest, and noblest of the aids-de-camp.

How many projects for the future!

Dresses, laces, jewelry, horses, carriages, journeys to foreign countries, sumptuous summer residences in the vicinity of St. Petersburg, — everything that rank and fortune could bring, — and more, the prattle of a young girl in love.

Cleopatra seated herself before the oval mirror after having removed her festal robes, which she threw upon the bed henceforth left vacant by the newly wedded bride; and in a slow, mechanical manner she began to undo and comb her hair.

It was magnificent, — long, heavy, fawn-colored gold, which made you think of the hair of a lion's cub.

Any attempt to separate it into parts or disentangle it was futile; it rose like a mist of vapor beneath the comb, and fell in a warm cloud, completely enveloping her beautiful person.

Two candles lighted her thoughtful face, that she watched for a long time in the mirror, slightly tipped backwards.

This face was luminous in its pearly whiteness; only at times was it touched with a tint of rose, called forth by some ardent thought.

Thus while the house, all the street, the entire city, slept beneath the snow, Cleopatra revived the past before questioning her future.

Educated at St. Petersburg, in the *Institut* of Sainte Catherine, among the daughters of the highest Russian aristocracy, Mlle. Bakhtof had distinguished herself for her splendid abilities, and had won the highest standard at each examination.

She knew she was poor, but that she belonged to a good line of nobility. This social rank, though it might not redeem her poverty in the world in which she was to live, gave her a brilliant position among her companions.

The uniform that was common to all the pupils allowed no distinction but that of beauty; and upon this ground Cleopatra knew she could be outdone by no one.

The day of the opening of the classes — it was the year that Mlle. Bakhtof was seventeen — her beauty was indeed bewildering.

The professor's entrance was the signal for the removal of the cambric capes, that during the hours of recreation completed the woollen costume of the pupils.

Cleopatra's bare shoulders and arms suddenly appeared in such perfection of form and brilliancy of skin that the whole class was moved.

The old professor himself, *blasé* as he had been for the last twenty years about the shoulders and necks of his pupils, could not help noticing that Mlle. Bakhtof was very charming.

The lesson finished, this was the only topic of conversation as the girls walked up and down the vast corridors, which served as promenades.

The charm of her face was disputed for several days, and then definitely classified; and, moreover, the emperor, during one of his visits, having stopped to speak with her an instant, Cleopatra was pronounced the "beauty" of the *Institut*.

Nobility and beauty! A little money added thereto how advantageous it would have been!

But General Bakhtof had squandered his personal property at a gambling-table; and, brave enough to face death, he had proved it at Varna,

— never having possessed any just balance of character.

His sister-in-law, who loved him as if he had been her own brother, received his two daughters into her own home.

The oldest had been educated at St. Petersburg, the other at Kazan: both at the expense of the State; and it was fortunate, for the income of both was less than three thousand francs.

Now, fifteen hundred francs does not provide for a future in a gay and prodigal society.

Cleopatra, however, did not believe for a moment that six months would elapse after her appearance in society ere her paltry allowance would be replaced by the brilliant fortune of a suitor.

Six months passed — then a year — then two: no one noticed the young girl.

Her beauty that had made her so famous at the *Institut* failed to produce any effect upon the world.

Her toilet, now pink, and then blue, in which her aunt dressed her, did not agree with her style of physiognomy.

Her complexion lost its radiance in white muslins. The manner of dressing the hair was not becoming to her.

Cleopatra realized it all, and grew angry before her mirror; but where was the remedy?

Irene had left the *Institut* at Kazan, and come to St. Petersburg, to take her place at the grand banquet of young ladies, greedy for marriage.

She was exactly the opposite of her sister, whom she resembled, however, but as a doll resembles a statue. Delicate, slender, small features, thin arms, laughing eyes, she conquered Prince Charamirof (a figure full six feet high) almost at first sight; and after this one interview he would have carried her off in the hollow of his hand, if he had been allowed.

But the aunt required that all the preliminary steps of marriage be fulfilled; and the ardent lover consented, with the promise that matters be despatched with haste.

He secured for his sister-in-law — as has been announced by one of his best friends — the position of maid-of-honor to the empress.

This caused great outcry; some were glad; others furious!

It was on Christmas-day, at the reception at the court, that Cleopatra was for the first time in her life presented to the world at her real worth; she was to be the belle of Russia for the ensuing year.

When she made her appearance, in a scarlet-velvet dress embroidered with gold, wearing the traditional Kakochnik as a crown upon her hair, every one was forced to acknowledge that the girls at school had reason to boast of the beauty of their companion.

That which was necessary to her proud stature was not the vaporous draperies that are becoming to young girls, but the heavy, dark silks worn by queens.

It was to Charamirof that she owed this new situation that had placed her upon a pedestal, henceforth to be gazed at by admiring crowds.

She felt in her heart some gratitude towards him, but as she threw back the two long braids of her hair, arranged for the night, she said to herself, with a satirical smile, "After all there is no occasion for indebtedness, — it was not for me he did it; is he not paid? Has he not obtained the woman he adored?"

But there was no blush on Cleopatra's face at the thought of the happy couple. She had read forbidden books, and never dropped her eyes before any picture; but for her such things had neither attraction nor repulsion.

At the most they were only a means, a means really, since it was this frailty of the flesh that had made of her a maid-of-honor, and of her sister Irene the Princess Charamirof. "When I marry, — I," — she thought, — she rested her elbows on the border of her toilet-table and stared into her own eyes, as if to read to the bottom of her soul, — "when I marry," continued her thought, strained towards that future still in the dark, — "when I marry it will not be because I am in love with a handsome fellow that will load me with silks and jewels. To fall in love is a weakness,— I shall never do it; it is a constraint; one no longer sees clearly. I shall marry to be somebody, — to obtain a position, play a rôle! Princess! What is that? a title! Rich! — that is something, but not sufficient.

"Give me a superior place, that nobody can take from me, — a position that will last after beauty has passed away — One can be better than princess!"

A warm glow mounted to her cheeks, and for an instant her face shone with radiant beauty. Her regard pierced more deeply her mirror. "Better than princess, — there are women who rise so high that they never descend again, — neither in this world nor eternity. They have a place in history!"

Cleopatra dared not finish her thought. Audacious as she was, she knew there were certain dreams that border upon madness.

She undressed rapidly, threw herself upon her bed, and slept as warriors do upon the eve of battle.

CHAPTER III.

AN OFFER.

IN general, when a woman has become renowned for her beauty, a squadron of admirers forms at her right, another squadron of enemies at her left, and these two divisions never cease to skirmish concerning this fair person. But it was not the case with Cleopatra. She had conquered a situation beyond all rivalry, which it was impossible to contest, — impossible, for the hour, to contend with her.

The only resource left to these troubled souls, then, was to range themselves beneath the banner of this belle of the season, which they did.

The Prince and Princess Charamirof passed their honeymoon at their country estates.

Cleopatra was the chief attraction during the carnival, which this year was specially brilliant. She was very well received at court, when her services called her there; but one could not say that the empress showed her any particular attention. Courteous and just, she did not manifest towards the new arrival any kindness, either by word or gesture, that might indicate special favor.

It was evident that Cleopatra filled well her place as a specimen of great beauty, but no one

had the least suspicion that she was equally well endowed intellectually. She was not of the sly, cunning intruders that know how to crowd themselves into places where they are not wanted; but her manners, simple and dignified, had assured her companions from the first that they need not fear to see her thrust herself forward to secure the good graces of her august superiors.

After a short time she was declared to be dull. "As dull as pretty," said one of the old pillars of the palace, whose business it had been for thirty years to classify the court ladies, and whose nomenclature had been universally adopted. Also, with the antiquated gallantry that still lingered there, he surnamed her the "belle indifférente," and the name adhered to her.

Meanwhile there was one man who had not been deceived as to Cleopatra. He was an officer of the guards, as ugly as shrewd, whose frightfully malicious turn of mind respected neither persons nor things, and whose noisy freaks had at different intervals caused his banishment from court. But he had always been recalled at the end of a few weeks, for they died of ennui when he was away.

Jean Kamoutzine had been struck at the first glance by the grave and noble features that distinguished Mlle. Bakhtof.

On several occasions he had met her in society, and talked with her; and it was his conviction that the Palmarès of the *Institut* of Sainte Catherine

had not deceived the world in conferring upon her the place of honor. As for Kamoutzine himself he was a strange man; much better endowed than most persons of his class, among whom the glitter of varnish takes the place of any real education.

He had achieved a serious course of study, and his career was open before him: still very young, he would have made a remarkable minister of war. But his taste for playing mischievous pranks was irresistible; his cleverness at the art of mystification that was formidable, soon closed every avenue open to a serious man. Perhaps a large fortune, wisely administered, might have created an independent situation for him in spite of everything; but Kamoutzine was poor, and accumulated a fresh debt every hour during the twenty-four. Now and then, when the sum of these debts became too exorbitant, he went and confessed to the Grand Duke Boris, who seemed to entertain for him the indulgent feelings of a parent. Then it was that he received a sharp reprimand and a check from the grand duke's privy purse. Sometimes he was exiled for eight days, but that was part of the lecture, and Kamoutzine called it being turned out to grass.

This odd man, rendered specially clairvoyant by his natural maliciousness, was the first of all the court to discover that behind the marble coldness of the beautiful Cleopatra there was hidden great personal intelligence.

The wildest admiration leaped up in his heart,

"What a woman!" he cried, "and how much might be made out of her!"

He paid her his respects at first under the cover of his habitual jokes, then with more insistance.

But the public, accustomed to every sort of mystification, had taught Cleopatra to distrust the words of the young *chevalier-garde*.

It was thus that he felt that plain language would be essential in order to be understood, and he resolved to speak in such a fashion as to cut off all retreat.

It was really a heroic sacrifice; for this man whose life had been spent in ridiculing others had a terrible fear of being ridiculed himself; but the admiration that he felt for the young maid-of-honor was an impulse beyond control.

Admiration is the exact name for the sentiment which he entertained, and into which there entered more of fear perhaps, than tenderness. She appeared to him to be above all other women, and it was on that account that he was determined to win her.

Prudence counselled him, however, to choose a moment, if he could, — the opportunity arising, — to cover himself with the pretext of some joke, and it was during fast days that he swore to make the declaration.

Since the foundation of the *Institut* of Sainte Catherine it had been the custom during carnival week for the court carriages to go in long files and take the young ladies to the fair. This was

held in the great square situated between the buildings of Saint Synode, Isaac's Church (not completed at that time), the Court of the Admiralty, and the Winter Palace. This ground, now cut up into open squares for public use, covered then a space of not less than one hundred and fifty yards in length, and of variable breadth.

From the opening of January constructions began to go up, — pantomime theatres, circuses, Russian mountains; a thousand amusements of different designs were collected together under the name of Balaganes, and no one scorned to show himself there, not even the highest nobility. Some went under the pretext of diverting the children; others frankly to be amused themselves.

The court carriages, each drawn by four horses, and adorned with two tall footmen, dressed up in the imperial livery, red, gold lace, and black eagles, made several times the entire circuit of the fair.

Five or six young ladies, with their class teacher, occupied a carriage, of which the coach doors were very much envied; for the acquaintances of the young ladies were allowed to salute them during the defile.

More than one romance was sketched there while the people formed in long lines, with staring eyes, and watched this procession, as the French peasants formerly did the king's pageant.

The maids-of-honor participated also in this innocent pleasure, and in turn were accorded places in court carriages; but Cleopatra had found

it more entertaining to seek permission to accompany one of her old teachers to the *Institut.*

She never demanded any privileges, and it was impossible to refuse her this slight favor. It was to the great annoyance of the girls that they saw her take a seat in one of the carriages.

But for her, this escapade was delightful. As much as she had desired formerly to escape from this cage, as she called it, she now experienced pleasure in finding herself on the way back, where four years ago she had left as a pupil.

She chatted and laughed, — something very unusual for her, — and her companions, seduced by her gracious ways, were in admiration before the maid-of honor, — so simple and merry!

For a moment the long procession halted; Kamoutzine, mounted on horseback, with many other young officers, reviewed the crowd of equipages of every sort, and his jeers did not spare the occupants, neither men nor women.

His eyes caught sight of Cleopatra, who, leaning out of the window, was also watching the long lines of foot-people.

"Mlle. Bakhtof, — la belle indifférente!" he said, in a low voice. "Heaven help me! — but I think she is laughing. I must go and see that."

A fantastic notion, almost unattainable, had seized him; skilfully directing his horse (in spite of the exclamations of this one and the other, in spite of the cries of the police charged to watch and maintain order), he managed to reach the ponderous

vehicle, and bowed low before the class teacher, with whom he was slightly acquainted.

"Hope you are well, mademoiselle!" he said; "delighted to recognize you in all this hubbub! — and — is not this our beautiful maid-of-honor? Good-morning! my comrade, — I beg your pardon, miss, I lay myself at your feet! What — going back to the *Institut!*"

"As you see," she replied, laughing. She was amused with everything that day.

"I wager that you have never seen the interior of a 'balagane'?"

"I admit it," said Cleopatra.

"It is very amusing — you must go!"

"What an idea!"

"Yes, yes! will you — to-morrow? — with your aunt? We will get up a party. There are a dozen ladies dying to go. Come! it is agreed? I will call at your house this evening, after dinner, to arrange for the hour."

The carriage started, and Kamoutzine's horse backed. Cleopatra scarcely had time to make a sign, which the young officer interpreted as her consent.

"What self-assurance!" she thought, "and that is what succeeds. That is the way to act, if one is to obtain what he seeks: make a refusal impossible."

In the evening, about eight o'clock, — they dine at five in the most aristocratic families, — Kamoutzine presented himself at the house of Madame Bakhtof.

This lady was dressing to go out, as it appeared from what Cleopatra told her visitor.

"Well, miss, is it agreed for to-morrow?" he said, seating himself.

"Why, no, sir! Neither my aunt nor myself have any desire to join in that pleasure-party." Kamoutzine's eyebrows expressed great astonishment.

"It is what I should have told you, if you had allowed me the time," continued Cleopatra, with mischievous gravity, which did not relax a muscle of her beautiful face.

"But I do not regret having come," said the young officer, bowing low; "the honor of being admitted to your house is ample recompense"—

"For your trouble" — added Cleopatra, with the same impassible demeanor.

"Miss — miss — listen, I pray you, without bantering. You are the loveliest person in St. Petersburg, and I am the ugliest of the officers of the guard."

"Oh, no!" interposed Cleopatra; "Razoumof is uglier than you."

"Do you think so? I don't."

"He has not the intelligent look."

"I thank you," replied Kamoutzine, with the same politeness. "To come to the point: between you, Venus and myself, Vulcan, there is an abyss; but mythology has taught us that a similar abyss was once closed up, although my comparison — well" —

"Excuse me; I do not know mythology," interrupted the young girl.

"You are adorable!" cried Kamoutzine, with a burst of enthusiasm. "I am only a beast by the side of you; but, if you will consent, let us renew that old story of 'La belle et la bête': my love will provide me with all the faculties which I lack, if you will only accept my hand."

Cleopatra experienced a feeling of deep emotion. Was it not an offer of marriage? She was past twenty-one, and for the first time in her life a man had asked her to become his wife; she could not refrain an emotion of gratitude.

"I have no money," continued Kamoutzine, "nor you either; but if your beauty renders you indispensable to the court, my — how shall I express it? — my oddity makes of me a subject that they cannot well get along without. You and I, — do you see, — we should make such a powerful party — united. What do you say to it? What extraordinary things we could accomplish, could we not? I, for the love I bear you — Oh! what could I not do!

"How strange," thought Cleopatra; "he is not ugly at present. Is it true that love transfigures those it touches?"

She fixed upon him such a look that he thought his prayer had been heard.

"You consent!" he cried, enraptured. "We will stir the universe. Those old ceilings in the palace will behold new things. There is need

enough of their being rejuvenated; and, really, all *they* want is to be amused, as you know. We will open their eyes. You are a power. It is not alone because you are beautiful, but because you are possessed of surpassing intelligence, that I adore you."

"Have you divined that?" said Cleopatra, with a proud smile. "The others consider me a fool."

"All the worse for them," replied Kamoutzine, excitedly; "they will see what it will cost them not to have been able to understand you. You say 'Yes,' — do you not?"

"I say 'No,'" replied the young girl, slowly lifting upon him her magnificent eyes, in which shone the cold look of absolute decision.

"What! 'No!'" stammered Kamoutzine, cut short in the exuberance of his joy.

"No; and 'no' once for always. Understand me, sir, I do not make this reply because you are ill-favored and poor, as you have just said; it is because you are a power, you must allow that I am another, and it is my opinion that isolation makes each of us stronger."

He looked at her stupefied. He had always placed her far above ordinary mortals, but not at that height.

She rose and straightened herself up imperceptibly, displaying her queenly grace and unrivalled beauty.

"I should embarrass you, perhaps, and you would embarrass me, I am sure. Oh! do not mis-

understand me," she added, catching from her suitor a glance, which was as instantly dropped.

"I shall only employ honest means to attain my ends; the slightest mistake, why, any unskilful act, would cause me to lose all my advantages. I shall live, Monsieur Kamoutzine, above all suspicion, up to the day when such marriage as I deserve shall place me in the position I ought to occupy; then I shall be a wife above reproach."

Baffled for an instant, Kamoutzine had had time to think better.

"You are a strong woman," he said with respect, into which there entered a little sarcasm; "but human weakness, what part do you give it in your play?"

"It serves me."

"Yes, the weakness of others; but your own?"

She smiled, and placed her white, polished fingers upon the arm of the young officer.

"I," she said, "I am not made to love."

He took the hand which was so near his, and was astonished to find it so calm and impassive. After having kissed it he let it fall.

"You may be mistaken," he said. "I believe one must be some time in love — more or less; but that is not the question. You will be loved without loving yourself; that is easy to imagine, and that has been your success with me."

"You do not love me," calmly replied Cleopatra.

"What! — I do not love you?"

"No; you like me, — you fancy me."

He laughed, though with a little bitterness.

"In the main you are perhaps right, and that is what saves my self-esteem."

"And you will please to remark, that I did not cause myself to be loved by you. I am not a coquette."

"No, that is true. You are not that, but a hundred times worse."

She smiled again, with that haughty smile that rendered her so irritating.

"Come," she said, "don't let us waste our time in saying sentimental things. I will not be your wife, but I am your friend, a true friend, always well informed, who will be able to serve you more than once. You — you are the most dangerous enemy one could have here; lay down your arms; be my faithful friend, and I pledge myself not to forget it."

"Ah, she thinks she is already at the top," thought Kamoutzine. "Can it be that she has some object? Bah! I shall know it. I accept," he said, speaking out; "but no treachery."

"I give you my word of honor," replied she, extending her hand.

He pressed this hand, — fluid, so to speak, — but the clasp that he felt was firm, vigorous, almost masculine.

"Friends, then," he concluded; "but I have paid you a little court."

"Continue," she said, with another smile, — the smile of a siren; winning beyond all description.

"Ah, woman! woman!" he cried, impossible to suppress a laugh. "And you pretend that you are not a coquette!"

She smiled again, but this time within and for herself.

"It is agreed that we do not go to the balaganes to-morrow," said she.

"As you please, miss."

He bowed with the most exquisite correctness, and retired.

"She is perfectly right," he said to himself, as his spurs were heard to resound on the pavement of the Petite Morskaïa. "I do not love her, not the least in the world; but she has dazzled me. The devil! If I thought to feel those little steel nippers beneath the exquisite covering of that velvety skin. Brr! I can feel the cold shivers run up and down my back at this moment. Well, it is all the same. We should have done well enough together; but, alone, she is capable of accomplishing more. I shall watch her, though. At the bottom — at the very bottom — I have not absolute confidence."

He pursued the course of his meditations to the Theatre Michel, where a French troop was to play that evening a drama from Dennery, and a farce from Palais Royal.

Too late for the farce, he followed the drama with interest, questioning with himself, all the

time, why in dramas they did not give the rôle of traitor to women.

"They are much shrewder than we are," he said, while his mind strolled off, far from the scene.

CHAPTER IV.

GENERAL COUNT NÉOUTOF.

THE season of Lent threw its usual dark veil over St. Petersburg, and especially the imperial court. The decrees of the Church were not to be trifled with in those days. Lent consisted of seven weeks of entire abstinence from all pleasures, rigorously carried out.

No balls, — but receptions, where low-neck dresses were obligatory, were to the entire satisfaction of those who no longer danced; no theatres; not one single spectacle; concerts — yes; but that is poor compensation for those who do not like concerts, and have a fancy for the ballet instead, — two opinions that generally go together.

It was more wearisome at the court than anywhere else; but of course they suffered their weariness with noble and silent dignity, as was becoming to royalty.

The evenings of attendance were not always very amusing. The young guards hinted that the days when Mlle. Bakhtof was in attendance were more dull than ordinary.

To tell the truth, the young people hated her. Instead of laughing and joking as her companions did, and indulging in a few little foolish coquet-

ries, which would lead to nothing more than to amuse the spectators, she listened in silence, with an air that betrayed neither contempt nor weariness ; — or perhaps a little compassion, very polite, when one would rather have suffered her sharpest criticism. Sometimes a grand duke would pass through this vast gallery-sort of antechamber belonging to the apartments of the empress, where the attendants waited for orders which rarely ever came.

According as he was young or old, the grand duke would cast a look, or chat a moment with some favorite. Then this star would disappear, leaving behind silent or garrulous jealousies, as the occasion might create.

The gossipings went on their accustomed way with the liberty that would have been envied in many other courts.

Finally, this easy and agreeable service, which, in turn, brought the most distinguished youth of the empire beneath the eyes of their sovereigns, was, for the men, a more serious diplomatic school than it had the appearance of being.

During Lent great propriety was demanded. One must not laugh too loud ; consequently laughter was suppressed. Only the pages of the chamber, who were less than seventeen years old, had great difficulty to restrain their youthful hilarity, especially when some important personage, with a ridiculous face, passed by them. And Heaven knows that, in order not to appear ridiculous in their eyes, one must be very perfect.

One Wednesday evening, day of fast for the Church, and strict unwholesome abstinence from meat for the whole of Russia, the young people in attendance at the palace, the maids-of-honor, as well as the guards and pages, had very poorly dined.

As every one knows, the cooking for princes is not the best; and in this instance the orthodox cook seemed to have taken special pains to show that he was more orthodox than Saint Synode himself, for the guests had left the table nearly starved.

But it must be allowed it was not wholly his fault. The Church of Russia banishes from the table all fat; not only all meat, but butter, milk, and eggs.

And fish, however appetizing it may be, gains nothing by being cooked in oil, — not olive oil, which was very rare in Russia at that epoch, but any oil, from which the imperfect processes have not extracted the original taste of hemp, rape-seed, or other substances. Besides, Wednesdays and Fridays even fish is not allowed among good orthodox Christians.

Now, to prepare a dinner without meat, game, or fish, — it can be done, but to make it good and acceptable is not an easy task; and for this reason the Chamber was not satisfied.

A few goers and comers fell beneath the blows of these glib tongues, and then slander grew inactive for want of nourishment; they were beginning to grow very weary when a grave, odd-

looking person went through the apartment, wholly unknown to this generation of new-comers.

"Who is that?" asked a young page in the corner.

"Il Signor Pulcinella!" replied Kamoutzine, drawing near.

"What did you say his name was?" asked a sentimental young lady, in English ear-rings, who professed to know the world.

"It is General Count Néoutof; height, four and a half feet; size, a ton; seventy-one years old; seven campaigns; five wounds; the ribbons of Saint André; hundred thousand roubles of revenue; a dog of character. Make a bow, ladies; he is a bachelor, — a marrying man!"

"Oh, a marrying man!"

A suppressed laugh spread among the young officers, and was participated in by some of the young ladies; but the last, hushed by a "Psh!" from the court-lady, reddened, feigned not to have laughed, and set out stronger than before.

"But there is no occasion for sport," replied Kamoutzine, with the most serious air. "Is he married, or not?" There was now a burst of laughter among the men, but this time the young ladies maintained their gravity. Some eyes sought their jewelry, others the folds of their dresses.

"He is not married; therefore he is a bachelor; therefore he is a marrying man. Ah, Mlle. Cleopatra! I understand all at last! It is that man who

is my rival; it is he who hinders you from accepting my feeble devotions!"

Kamoutzine, in order to keep up an easy and constant communication with Cleopatra had pretended to play the rôle of a dismissed suitor, in which was mingled now and then a little ardor, almost real. To his great surprise, instead of replying to him, as was her custom, in some indulgent jest as might be accorded a lover as persevering as abused, the young girl knit her brows imperceptibly, and kept silent.

"Have I displeased you?" asked the young man, approaching her.

"There are jokes that I consider out of place," replied Mlle. Bakhtof.

"Bah! What harm can it do a soul that lives, if the count is so perfectly ugly, so completely ridiculous, since he is loaded with honors and riches, and even virtues?"

Cleopatra did not redden; she grew pale, which with her was a sign of anger.

"You are not prudent, Monsieur Kamoutzine; it is your fault that you create enemies for yourself; and then you are astonished that you have them. Let the old man rest in peace."

"I am willing!" replied he, with unconcern; "but you will agree that he is very ugly."

Others had approached them, listening slyly behind; for always when Kamoutzine criticised any one, they expected to be amused.

Cleopatra's reply was heard by several.

"Who is that?" asked one.

"General Count Néoutof," replied she, with something of bravado.

The General Count did not interest any one, and the subject was dropped.

For a day or two Kamoutzine questioned with himself what motive could have impelled the beautiful Cleopatra to take such a lively interest in this old soldier, this veteran from Province, who was rarely seen in St. Petersburg? He could find no plausible reason. Then he sought to know why the general had come, — he who for several years had not quitted the superb estates in the government of Tver.

Here a response was ready. The Grand Duke Boris had invited him, his old friend, his fellow-soldier under the emperor, Alexander the first, to come and see him.

Probably a little outside politics was mixed with this signal favor; but Kamoutzine was not interested in outside politics. After having meditated a little he gave it up, and concluded with this aphorism: Women have no need of motives in order to act!

CHAPTER V.

TABLEAUX VIVANS.

THE great season of Lent still continued. A return of cold gave at this season a retrospective of winter more desolating and disheartening than winter itself. Only the Theatre Michel was open, and now and then gave representations of tableaux vivans; a sort of compromise with timid consciences. It was a spectacle, but not a comedy. Pious people remained away, and no old ladies frequented the spot. Men, on the other hand, set a high estimate upon this sort of diversion, which permitted them to admire the pretty actresses from another point of view than that of elocution.

Moreover this taste was strongly encouraged; the grand duke suddenly appeared to take the *tableaux vivans* beneath his protection. He even went so far as to suggest some subjects to the manager of the Theatre Michel, whose duty it was to see that they were executed in the best manner possible; and the truth compels us to state that, nowhere has any one ever seen *tableaux vivans* mounted with such artistic perfection.

To amuse the eyes for sixty seconds it was nothing unusual to have spent a week in rehearsals, research, and hard labor.

If the result obtained was not of much importance, since nothing remained after the curtain fell, the subject in itself was generally beautiful and striking, or, at least, elegant and graceful.

The moment that the grand duke patronized the *tableaux vivans*, they became the rendez-vous of fashion.

Mlle. Bakhtof did not miss one representation. She was sure to be seen with her aunt, in a box that she had hired, in the first gallery, near to the stage, at the left.

Their friends went there to pay them short visits between the entre-acts which were long and numerous; and Kamoutzine never failed to be there.

One evening these acts were prolonged beyond the usual time, and the grand duke did not seem to manifest as much pleasure as usual in this his favorite diversion. He leaned over the side of the box, that he always occupied. It was a large deep stage-box, with a reception-room attached.

Opera-glass in hand he reviewed the hall, where different classes in society were arranged in rows, almost as distinctly divided as if they had been cut in slices.

Near at his hand were the orchestra chairs, occupied by men in full view, — officers in brilliant costumes, civil functionaries in black coats; above were the boxes of the first gallery, — *le bel étage*, as they say, using the French words. It was here that the real acknowledged aristocracy sat with their wives, for a lady that belonged to high society

was not allowed, under any pretext whatever, to be seen in the orchestra chairs.

In the second gallery of boxes were to be seen the parvenus, — French women engaged in business, who found themselves at home there; higher still were the working-classes and Parisian hairdressers. In all, a mixed multitude, but perfectly well behaved, who, whether amused or fatigued, kept silent, — behavior that was becoming to good society.

The grand duke's opera-glass, out of curiosity, had gone to the upper galleries; it stopped at the first box of the *bel étage*, almost opposite.

"Kamoutzine," he said to his aid-de-camp, seated behind him, at a respectful distance, "who is it in that box? Is it not the fair Cleopatra?"

"It is, Your Imperial Highness."

The eye of the duke then sought the great box that belonged to the court; it was vast, empty, gloomy, gaping, sumptuously illuminated, and seemed to serve no other purpose the whole year round than to annoy the actors with its empty stare (the empress, be it said, did not patronize the Michel Theatre).

"Why is she not down in that box?" asked the duke. "It would be charitable to allow that to be filled with poor girls, gratis, instead of making them pay for a place."

This observation was not expected to receive any reply, so Kamoutzine kept his dignified and respectful pose.

"She is very beautiful — that Cleopatra Bakhtof — I can't imagine how, with that air of a goddess, she can amuse herself with these little machines that they give us here this evening."

"Perhaps she is not amused!" Kamoutzine ventured to say, with that false timidity that pardoned many of his audacious remarks.

"Why does she come, then?" fell from the duke, speaking in an absent manner.

A mental flash illuminated the situation for Kamoutzine; he understood Cleopatra's words, which had formerly seemed so secure.

He understood a thousand mysterious details that he had found so childish.

The defence made by the young maid-of-honor in behalf of his master, in the midst of the railleries of the gay young pages, was no longer illogical.

"Why does she come?" repeated the artful courtier; "your Imperial Highness comes here. What if you are not always amused?"

Silence followed this sally, and immediately the curtain rose.

The Grand Duke Boris, like all of his family, was one of the handsomest cavaliers to be seen. Tall, of a noble and assured deportment, he looked upon the world about him with eyes whose lustre was often softened by a ray of kindness, or brightened by a discreet smile.

This smile was all that outsiders ever saw, but the chosen few admitted to his friendship knew

that the Grand Duke Boris, free from official restraint, loved to laugh — and that right heartily.

Like those of his family, he had married young; but, after a few short years of a happy union, he was left a widower without children. Rebellious towards every insistance for a new marriage, he led rather of an apart existence, different from the other lives of his brothers, uncles, or cousins.

At the grand court they called him an eccentric character.

Scarcely thirty-eight he was always amiable in the presence of ladies, but never showed preference for any particular one.

This reserve, as well as his refusal to marry again, had provoked many comments.

Some said that he was secretly nourishing a deep love for some unknown person; and perhaps it was true.

Some search was made, but they dared not go very far, for fear of provoking anger or awakening some formidable opposition: and the end was, that the matter dropped.

Kamoutzine was not of the number of the two or three confidants necessary to the duke, and really he troubled himself very little about the love affairs of his imperial protector. But the sudden illumination had opened new horizons. He understood now the interest that had induced Cleopatra to visit the *tableaux vivans* at the Theatre Michel.

"Her promises of friendship are all explained

to me now," he said. "To succeed in her little projects she has need of me; but what does she want? To be a La Valliére by approximation? That union might be flattering, but it would promise no great future. A legitimate husband! Oh! oh! miss! You are not ambitious by half!" While he was lost in these reflections the grand duke rose to go. Before leaving his box he cast a last glance over the hall, as was his custom, and a portion of the look fell upon Cleopatra. She returned it so frankly that to have feigned not to see her would have been rude. His recognition was a bow of the head, scarcely perceptible, — a half recognition, so to speak; and he turned directly so as to avoid any ceremonial greeting that would have been necessary on her part.

"Ah! indeed!" thought Kamoutzine. "You made him bow, miss. Ah! that is very nice, and not within the power of every one."

Although the duke had a palace at St. Petersburg he chose to occupy, even in winter, his splendid summer residence, situated on the island of Krestovsky, one of the islands that form at the mouth of the Néva a magnificent delta.

A new fall of snow had spread the entire route with a uniform carpet, over which the sleigh flew as easily as if it had been the cold season of Epiphany. The grand duke returned in a small sledge drawn by two fast horses, while his coachman and one domestic completed his escort. The night was

clear, and the air sharp enough to make it seem delicious after the heated air of the theatre.

His Highness lighted his cigar as soon as he had reached the Néva, which he crossed on the ice, and gave himself up to the pleasure of enjoying its fragrance without infringing upon the rule which prohibited smoking in the streets, on account of the constant danger of setting fire to the city, — constructed, as it was, or a part of it, of wood.

But it was one of the peculiarities — a mania — of Grand Duke Boris, to submit to all rules, as if they existed for the Imperial Highnesses! But no one could ever correct him of that.

Several days following this event, Kamoutzine being in attendance at the palace of Krestovsky, his august protector showed him some precious arms — swords, sabres, etc. — that he had just received from Asia. They spent two or three hours examining them.

"Arrange them for me on a table," said the grand duke. "I am going to the Theatre Michel. I wish to find them in order when I return."

"It can be done in five minutes," replied Kamoutzine, promptly. "Is it the command of Your Highness that I accompany you?"

"No! Stay here. I shall not be absent more than an hour or two. You can busy yourself with that during my absence, and we will finish the inspection when I return."

Then Boris entered his room to take a last look at his toilet.

Resistance was useless; but in the meantime Kamoutzine burned with desire to see with his own eyes why the grand duke went to the Theatre Michel that evening.

Growling to himself about the freaks of these people in high life, he stole out secretly, and gave an order in a low tone to his faithful servant, who was on duty in the antechamber.

Five minutes later Boris reappeared, his gloves in his hand.

"I will see you soon," he said, in a pleasant tone, to his aid-de-camp. "When I return we will take a cup of tea together."

The soft jingle of sleigh-bells warned Kamoutzine that his master had departed.

To jump into his regimental overcoat, warmly lined with astrachan, take a seat in a hired sleigh hitched to one fleet horse (always on the premises, ready for emergencies), was for Kamoutzine an affair of a moment.

The trotters of the grand duke were fast, but a double team could not travel with the speed of a single horse well driven. Before his Imperial Highness had reached the last houses of the suburbs Kamoutzine was already upon the Néva, saying to himself that he was at least two minutes ahead of him. It was running a great risk, for the grand duke might see him, and take his disobedience very seriously. But the need of knowing, acting, injuring, or serving somebody, as the occasion might be, entered so largely into the formation

of Kamoutzine's character, together with his break-neck principles, that he considered the affair as an excellent farce, from which he could happily extricate himself. He entered the hall, took a seat not far from the grand duke's box, on the same side, and observed tranquilly his friend. She was there, and appeared to be taking deep interest in what a young man was relating to her. The music that played innumerable waltzes or polkas between the tableaux was not able to distract her attention.

She smiled now and then, and Kamoutzine, who had excellent eyes, caught glimpses of her brilliant white teeth.

There was a little stir in the theatre, and the Grand Duke Boris entered his box.

Not anxious to be seen, he took a seat a little in the shade, and carelessly looked about the hall, waiting for the rising of the curtain, which was not long delayed.

The tableau was duly applauded, the music recommenced, and each one began to look around.

Mlle. Bakhtof was continually smiling. The august opera-glass of her vis-à-vis was directed towards her, but she did not appear to notice it.

"Stranger than ever," thought Kamoutzine. "It is well that I came; there is fun ahead. My patron will never know that I am here. He thinks that I am over there, occupied with his arms! Here is a fine piece of work for me, really!"

As he thus reflected some one bowed to him. He replied by a boyish gesture, which was proper

for him, and well understood among all of his acquaintances.

The opera-glass of the grand duke turned mechanically to see who had caused the tall Razoumof to laugh; and in the focus of the glass who was it that appeared to the astonished eyes of His Highness? No other than Kamoutzine himself, — he who ought to be at home occupied with the Asiatic arms.

Boris was as good-natured as was possible for one to be who belonged to a reigning family; but this was going too far. Thinking he must be mistaken, he looked with the naked eye, in order to see more distinctly; yes, it was his aid-de-camp. His glass had not misled him.

His Highness shook from head to foot with momentary anger.

Some unexplained movement, perhaps a frightened gesture from Cleopatra, who had seen all and divined something, warned Kamoutzine, who looked at his master, and saw that he was preparing to leave.

"He has seen me; I am lost!" was his first thought. "I am saved!" was his second, which followed instantly.

Forcing a passage among the by-standers outside, who were balancing and swinging their heads to one of Schubert's waltzes, he reached the peristyle reserved especially for the imperial family.

Boris's footman was waiting, dressed in his long regimental cloak, with a gray cloth pelerine, ornamented with three red bands.

It was the simple livery worn by every general's footman, and which is adopted among the people of high rank for their servants when they wish to go out without being observed.

"On duty," said Kamoutzine to the bewildered domestic, at the same time snatching his cloak from his shoulders and his helmet from his hand. "Go get my cloak and return to the palace with my sleigh — quick!"

The servant, still stupefied at the proceedings, started off at full speed, at the very moment when the grand duke appeared.

"My sleigh," he said sharply.

Kamoutzine, lowering the helmet over his eyes, dashed ahead, and less than thirty seconds after the sleigh was flying over the snow towards the palace of Krestovsky.

The journey was made in an incredibly short time. Only one circumstance caused the loss of a few seconds: not expecting the duke so early, the gate was closed.

The footman descended hastily, called the guard, and started ahead. Instead of mounting behind the sleigh he ran to the palace, following a little footpath which represented a bowstring, the arch of which was indicated by the highway.

The horses, enveloped in a cloud of vapor, stopped before the broad flight of steps sparkling with fine particles of snow.

The grand duke sprang down, ran up the five or six marble steps into the light of the lanterns sus-

pended in the arched passage, and caught sight of Kamoutzine, who, with uncovered head, in uniform, was respectfully waiting his arrival.

The encounter was so unexpected that, grand duke though he was, Boris stood amazed, as if nailed to the spot.

"Is it you?" he said, as naïvely as any one could have said.

"Myself, Your Imperial Highness!"

Boris entered the palace and threw down his cloak, while his search penetrated to the depths of his cabinet. The arms were upon the table, those he had left there. The tea, smoking, was waiting upon a tray.

He drew off his gloves, and, standing, faced his aid-de-camp. "Listen," he said: "you have disobeyed me; you have mystified me; you know what it costs to play with me. I will pardon you, however, because it is a good joke; but you must tell me how it happened that you reached home before I did."

Kamoutzine had listened with a bowed head; he regained his usual attitude by imperceptible degrees.

"That is very simple. Your Imperial Highness was hindered an instant at the gate. It was that delay which gave me the opportunity to get ahead of you."

"You are deceiving me!" cried the grand duke, with impatience. "There was not a single team behind me on the road. I turned around a dozen times to see."

"I know that very well, your Highness."

"But where were you?"

"In the livery of your domestic, Highness. I was standing behind you; it was you who brought me home."

The grand duke could contain himself no longer; he threw himself into an arm-chair, and laughed with all his might.

After laughing he took on a serious air. "It is well," he said; "but don't do it again. You will remember that twice you have been exiled to your estate on account of a farce."

"Your Highness never would have the heart to send me there in winter."

"You will see if you do that thing again. I allow you to amuse yourself with others, but when it concerns me— Why were you so persistent about going to the Theatre Michel to-night?"

Kamoutzine's face wore a droll, confused look.

"It is my secret, and I am obliged to confess it. I make the sacrifice. It was to see the object of my unhappy passion."

"You disappointed — my poor Kamoutzine?" said Boris, who was enjoying himself decidedly more than at the theatre.

"You are the only one that is ignorant of it, my lord."

"And dare one ask who is the object of your passion?"

"One is not allowed to hide anything from you, my lord: it is the fair Cleopatra."

"Pacha Bakhtof?"

"Precisely. She is beautiful, and I adore her —far off. She does not think of me."

"Of whom does she think then?" he demanded, turning his head to pour a cup of tea.

"That, my lord, is the secret of the gods."

The tone in which this phrase was pronounced left the field open to many conjectures. Boris, perhaps, understood him; for he kept silent, and when he spoke it was concerning the Asiatic arms.

CHAPTER VI.

LOVERS.

CHARAMIROF had returned with his wife, and Cleopatra, as had been agreed upon, was installed in their house for an indefinite length of time.

This was for her a season of severe trials.

The luxury which she had dreamed to possess herself, and even more magnificent, was a painful contrast with her restricted toilet, parsimoniously lotted out; and Irene had a way of creating distances between herself and others without having the appearance of doing it, which was torture to a proud, sensitive soul. The prince was a great, good boy, not malicious by nature. It was an amusing scene to see this colossal statue led about by a golden thread of his wife's hair, and engaged in more than one delicate adventure, where she found the way to make him manœuvre without doing any damage.

Irene was born for intrigues. At the time of the Valois in France she would have stirred the court from top to bottom. The present time, however, did not furnish her any very brilliant battle-field; but she knew how to contrive small plots and mix things up, in the end to have the pleasure of un-

ravelling them, or of leading others therein, and embroiling the affair still more.

It was futile for her to revolve the secret intentions of her sister as to her matrimonial intentions; she could not arrive at any correct divination.

It must be admitted, however, in order to do justice to her sagacity, that Cleopatra's ambition was so extraordinary that no one would dare to presume to attain to it. For that one would have to be in the position of Kamoutzine, *au cœur de la place.*

Cleopatra's silence as to her intentions rendered her sister very impatient.

Irene was three years younger than her sister, but her rank as married woman, and to the finest party in the court, gave her great importance in her own eyes, and counterbalanced by far the advantage of age.

Therefore she could not pardon the maid-of-honor her dumbness, neither her air of superiority. Her teasings proving useless, she suddenly took on some for the sphinx to whom she had offered hospitality.

In general there is nothing so irritating as to have near you — in the midst of your daily life, or in special friendly relations — a sphinx, even though she be amiable; who never reveals any emotions, or betrays in any way the secret of her reflections; who treats you always with the same smiling, silent, affability. And, perhaps, the most exasperating of all is to see that this voiceless sphinx suffers,

and the moment that you would tender her any sympathy or consolation she resumes again that impenetrable, smiling air. Neither patience nor friendship will hold before such a party, always ready to turn you away from its interior life.

Irene suffered no moral wounds, but her self-love was cruelly irritated.

She had imagined that immediately upon her return to St. Petersburg she would become the confidant of her sister; an exchange for the confidences that she had poured into her willing ears, during the period of her engagement.

But when she saw that Cleopatra would not communicate to her any of her impressions, upon any subject whatever, she felt injured; some one had certainly wronged her.

A moral barrier, at first slight, was insensibly being formed between the two sisters.

Madame Bakhtof, having been called to the country by some urgent family duties, had left Cleopatra with her brother-in-law. Her absence was to be short, but unseen circumstances had prolonged it, and even threatened to make it definite.

"Well," said the good Charamirof, "what difference does that make to Cleopatra? We shall keep her here with us till she marries."

Irene made no objection; she even acquiesced graciously.

"Certainly."

But at the bottom of her heart she hoped that

Cleopatra would have the politeness to marry very soon; to the end that she might not be annoyed much longer by her mysterious company.

Easter, meantime, had come with the renewal of all the brilliant fêtes of winter. The Princess Charamirof opened her house for two magnificent balls, where were seen the flower of the nobility among the rich citizens of St. Petersburg.

Naturally Kamoutzine was invited; and, very naturally also, General Count Néoutof was to be found among the afternoon guests of the pretty little princess.

The portrait that Kamoutzine had drawn of Néoutof was perfect. Il Signor Pulcinella appeared to be his true name; but with that he possessed such an imposing carriage that to see him was indeed no temptation to laugh. No one with such a ridiculous exterior could have carried himself off with greater dignity and nobility of demeanor.

It was soon to be remarked that in the circle of the princess the eyes of Néoutof never left the face of the fair Cleopatra.

"She is astonishingly beautiful, is she not?" said Kamoutzine, one day, to him.

"So beautiful," replied Néoutof, in his guttural voice; "so completely and audaciously beautiful, that I would like, above all things, to obtain permission to have her reproduced in marble for the sake of having her always beneath my eyes."

What homage could have been more delicate?

Cleopatra was informed of it, and soon the

general had the joy of seeing her take a seat, when he went to speak to her, and offer him one, in order that he might not stand too long upon his gouty feet.

It was pure humanity on the part of the young girl; but at the same time it gave him authority to talk longer with her than would have been proper at a simple meeting in the salon.

Néoutof was confounded that she was possessed of a serious mind,—almost too serious,—extensive information, and good sense.

According to gossip he was resigned to find her only beautiful; now he found her intelligent and refined. It was bewildering.

Cleopatra was prodigal with him, never sparing the treasures of her intelligence.

She did all she could to win him over, using those charming secret graces that were hidden to vulgar eyes.

She was all the more assiduous, for she knew that her confidences flew far above the infirm old man, and went to the grand duke.

It was known that a close friendship bound Boris to the old friend of his father. This man of thirty-eight experienced sweet pleasure in the society of this old warrior of 1812, whose clear and active mind, sharp and discerning intellect, characterized men and things in firm and subtle words. When men of his age have preserved themselves healthy in heart and mind they present that harmony of qualities that can scarcely be appreciated.

General Count Néoutof had been page to the great Catharine; he knew all, understood all, and judged all with that simplicity that is the fruit, not of naïveté, but of wisdom the most delicate, the most finished. He had practised diplomacy so long that he had returned to perfect sincerity, according to a well-known maxim. It was for the Grand Duke Boris like entering a new world, with which, however, his own nature was in perfect sympathy.

Separated from political life himself, he tolerated it through politeness, or motives of propriety, but really it was little to him.

General Néoutof might have reconciled him to it if he had wished; but he found it more interesting to converse thereof as dilettante with this man belonging to a sovereign race, born rather to enjoy the life of an artist, but not having the leisure to realize this dream, who looked upon things generally with the eye of an amateur.

Cleopatra had calculated rightly; her name had been heard more than once in the course of their conversations. The grand duke learned, with great astonishment, that this beautiful person was also a superior woman; all the more superior, since she found such keen pleasure in the society of an old and somewhat antiquated man, like General Néoutof.

"Who would have suspected?" he said, and his surprise was more profound than he himself could have believed.

"Kamoutzine had some idea of it," replied Néoutof.

"Kamoutzine! — yes, — he has spoken a word to me — I believe — She is insensible, does it appear?"

"So they say," responded the general, speaking briefly.

More than once Boris questioned the veteran as to his young and beautiful friend. Little by little he found pleasure in teasing him, and feigning to doubt the intelligence and beauty of Cleopatra; and while he was amusing himself with this game Néoutof grew irritable.

"Heaven pardon me!" cried the grand duke one day; "you are in love."

The old man looked at the prince as he formerly had looked at the enemy. His brown eyes glittered beneath the shaggy tufts of his white eyebrows.

"In love, my lord! If it pleases your Imperial Highness to joke about the feelings of a man of my age — then I am in love most assuredly; but you have other buffoons, and I am not yet so childish as to make it easy to render me so ridiculous."

"There! there!" said Boris; "do not thou be angry, my old father."

This *tutoiement* from the lips of a tsar, or relative of the tsar, was a special favor,— a mark of paramount friendship. The tone in which he had spoken was really touching and respectful. The old man lowered his eyes.

"I was wrong," he said, "to take seriously an innocent joke. Will you pardon me?"

The grand duke laid his hand fondly upon the shoulder of the man who had received five wounds in the service of his own family.

"It is Kamoutzine — he spoils me," said he, smiling. "That fool ridicules everything to such a degree that I myself sometimes neglect the rules of decorum.

"He never permitted himself, I hope, to jest about Mlle. Bakhtof?"

"No, never; it is even astonishing; you would think he was afraid of her. Besides, he declares that he is hopelessly enamored."

"He!" cried the general, with a decidedly scornful gesture, — "he allows himself! — but you said just now that he respects nothing."

He began at once to speak of other things, and the conversation turned upon more serious subjects. But when alone the grand duke took a few steps up and down his cabinet, repeating to himself: —

"Who would have suspected it?"

It was not only of Cleopatra's intelligence that he was thinking, but the strange passion that he had seen burn in Néoutof's eyes, and his proud response, which was not a denial.

Kamoutzine and Néoutof! What an abyss between these two men! One upon the highest round of moral virtue; the other so low! Yet both loved, both respected, this singular Cleopatra. Whom did she love?

"It is the secret of the gods," Kamoutzine had said.

A twinge of anger shot through the heart of the prince. "How is it that Kamoutzine dares to take the liberty to speak of this young girl? A person so honorable ought not to be named by such lips!"

The secret of the gods — and suddenly Boris recalled the look with which she had regarded him the last time they met. Was it possible that she loved some one, that she raised to his face those eyes so full of trouble and exquisite sweetness!

He suddenly remembered that already more than once, without accounting for it, he had thought that perhaps she loved him.

How many times a prince, member of a royal family, may he not boast of having been loved ere he reaches the age of thirty-eight?

Though he may be of little account personally, where is the young girl in the circle of his acquaintances who has not felt her heart beat a little for him?

Boris was not moved by such accidents that were common in a life like his. A kind regard, a smile, spread happiness around him, and there the dream ended.

But this time the adventure presented itself in another light, and the grand duke remained a moment absorbed, tormenting a chiselled paper-cutter, companion of his meditations.

"What folly!" he said, pushing this silent con-

ndant far from him; "am I going to fret because a maid-of-honor has pretty eyes?"

He ordered a horse, and set out for a long promenade, escorted by the inevitable Kamoutzine; but the society of this trickster did not have the same exhilarating effect upon him as usual.

CHAPTER VII.

SISTER'S LOVE.

ONE should not be too precipitate when seeking to reach some secret purpose, especially if the ways are a little crooked.

Cleopatra did not hurry. Weeks and months were of little importance to her. Life is long when one knows how to employ every moment. At times she believed she was advancing rapidly in the course she had marked out for herself; other days it suddenly came to her that she was falling far behind, and she should never attain to anything.

One evening, — it was near the period when the court was to leave St. Petersburg to repair to the summer residence at Tsarskoé-Sélo, — the grand duke chanced to cross a deserted salon to present himself to the empress, when he perceived Cleopatra in the distance, approaching him.

With hesitation — something unusual for him — he slackened his step, and when near her stopped.

In the long suite of rooms, before and behind them, a multitude of people, of every description, were going and coming, but without heeding them. He could not resist the temptation to observe this beautiful girl near to, whose rare privilege it was to lose nothing from close scrutiny.

He was seized also with the strange desire to hear her speak. The rich, grave voice, which he had heard but a few times up to that moment, would it not have another intonation when addressed to him?

"Alone, mademoiselle? — lost in the windings of this labyrinth?" he said, with a careless smile.

"I am tired, my lord, and have obtained permission to go home."

The velvety voice trembled imperceptibly in pronouncing these commonplace words, and the magnificent eyes were lowered; while an ideal blush mounted to the marble cheeks, and made them more humanly beautiful.

Boris understood full well that she made slaves of those upon whom she deigned to smile.

"Not ill, I hope," he said, guarding an exterior of frigid politeness, as was becoming to him.

"Oh, no, my lord; a slight headache; besides, for the last moment — I feel much better."

She looked at him; her clear and tranquil regard was intended to contradict the audacity of her words.

He was almost irritated that she dared to look at him thus; and yet, if she had acted otherwise, he would have condemned her.

"I hope it will be nothing more serious," he said, bowing with ceremony. "Good-evening, mademoiselle."

She dropped a formal courtesy, and retired without turning her head.

Cleopatra had gained ground in this encounter, in spite of her apparent defeat, for the grand duke turned round, and saw her disappear at the extremity of the suite of parlors; after which, twirling his mustache, he went his way.

The ice was broken. After that, they met a number of times, and always Boris exchanged a few words with the "*belle indifférente.*"

The court repaired to Tsarskoé-Sélo, and the interviews became more rare, although Boris showed himself especially attentive to the grand court this summer. He came very willingly, and spent days, and even nights, at the residence, taking a more active part than common in the gay little reunions Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Decorum was not just the same here; besides, an encounter was very possible in the gardens.

Perilous gardens, where the trees had as many eyes as leaves; but who could have found any harm in the chance meeting of a prince and maid-of-honor, upon the marble bridge, at the wharf, or, in a word, any frequented place in full view of the park?

Charamirof, with his wife and sister-in-law, had hired one of the most sumptuous villas in this elegant little city, planted as an ornament, for the sole purpose of serving the chateau.

Dusty, badly shaded, Tsarskoé-Sélo would have had no reason to exist, if it had not been for the imperial residence. Its large streets, at right angles, seem to be made for a torrent of carriages to tear and fly in every direction.

It would be difficult to buy a pocket-handkerchief here; while, on the other hand, jewelers' shops are numerous. Is it not necessary, sometimes, to have a bracelet repaired within an hour, or some damaged locket?

It was in this artificial abode that Kamoutzine found the largest field to practise his love of mockery. His jokes were not always in good taste — but — in the country — etiquette was more indulgent; laughter open and free; and the day that he mixed up the sheets of music — pieces to be played beneath the palace windows, producing, to the inexpressible horror of the *kappellmeister*, the most frightful discord that ever was heard — the imperial family only laughed.

Irene's taste had grown fastidious since becoming a princess, and the jokes of Kamoutzine possessed the power to make her furious.

"That man has the manners of a travelling clerk," she said one day to her husband; "I can't understand how you can receive him here. And Cleopatra, whom I thought more dainty, seems to delight in him."

Cleopatra moved slightly in the arm-chair in which she had buried herself; but Charamirof burst out with the hearty laugh of a boy.

"Kamoutzine! Why, he is the joy of my heart! What would become of us all if there were no longer any Kamoutzine? We should all die of stupidity."

Irene shrugged her shoulders with disdain.

"How like a man!" said this Minerva of nineteen years. "That will do for you, for men's tastes in general are not of a very high standard; but you, Cleopatra?"

"I do not delight in him," replied Cleopatra, with a calm voice. "Simply, he is a clever boy; and because he is odd I do not see why I should be more difficult to please than the imperial family, who tolerate him."

"Oh, you — you are one of the formal set," said Irene, with a wicked look. "I suppose you will take the place of the first *dame d'honneur* when she gives in her resignation; as if nothing were good but what came from high."

"Irene! you are seditious," said Charamirof, raising his voice.

"One of your shocking jokes!" responded she, with an angry tone.

But it was not easy to rouse her husband; all the return she got was bursts of laughter to this sort of talk, half sweet and tartish. She laid the blame, not to the prince, who was, after all, master of his house and of her; but it was her sister that she held morally responsible for all her little dissatisfactions.

The villa that they occupied, though vast, was not the Mansion Charamirof, and they were forced to live nearer one to the other, and more crowded.

Cleopatra's chamber, if it had not been assigned especially to her, would have made a convenient linen-press, the most agreeable to Irene.

The princess would have liked to deposit her dresses there, all her linen, and come there every day to confer with her skilful French chamber-maid, who was engaged in perfecting her summer toilet. But Charamirof having chosen this apartment for his sister-in-law, Irene was constrained to relegate Mlle. Louise to a vast room, badly lighted, that looked into the court, and which was near a stable.

The chamber-maid never ceased to complain of the bad light, which troubled her about sewing, and of the neighborhood, which forced her to close her windows when they washed the carriages.

These daily complaints ended in exasperating the young wife. Instead of imposing silence she allowed herself to be overcome by an increasing ill-temper relative to her sister.

If she were away this would not have arisen. Little by little there was born within her a real antipathy for Cleopatra, and she only thought of some means by which she could get rid of her.

The way was simple: she must get married. Thus the young wife employed all her intelligence to circumvent her sister upon this point. But Cleopatra had such a manner of letting people talk and act, without hearing or seeing that which displeased her, that one could never reach the point of insinuating anything to her. It was necessary to speak openly.

Irene had been tempted more than once to do it; but she always retreated at the last moment.

How could she face her sister, portionless, and

say, "You weary me; you trouble me; go; and, as I do not wish to turn you out of doors, marry, that I may be rid of you."

That was decidedly impossible. Irene renounced making any direct attack but promised herself in revenge not to miss the occasion, if ever one presented itself.

Néoutof came to Tsarskoé-Sélo as he had come to St. Petersburg. This man, that never left his country-seat, who had lived a dozen years without thinking to breathe the air of cities, had become as worldly as any lord high chamberlain. Being much loved at the palace he often passed the evening there, and he was seen making a round of afternoon visits, which invariably ended at the house of Charamirof.

Irene could not endure him. Since she perceived that he came to see Cleopatra she had taken a dislike to him that was very apparent. The old general belonged to the class who want to see only the agreeable side of life. He continued to be exceedingly polite to the princess, and loaded the two sisters with bouquets and iced fruits.

Irene, who loved presents, received the flowers and bonbons with a smile, and reserved her sharp words for Cleopatra, who was responsible for the attentions of this unwelcome courtier. It was another grievance against her.

It was as difficult now to get rid of Néoutof as of Cleopatra herself. The anger of the young wife increased; she struggled, furious at her helpless-

ness, when chance one day brought her a possible solution of the problem.

Beneath the scattered trees of the Charamirof garden, the society that habitually gathered about Irene was seen one day, about four o'clock in the afternoon.

The borders of geraniums were baking in the sun, and to prevent the visitors from undergoing the same torture an awning had been stretched between four trees, that threw upon the grass the necessary shade.

After a long and friendly chat Néoutof took leave of Cleopatra, and, according to his custom, kissed her hand.

At that moment a lady said to Irene : —

" See the general ! Is it not touching, — the affection that he shows your sister? It is only old gentlemen like him who show women such marks of courtesy. One sees it no longer in our days."

Cleopatra had conducted her old friend to the gate, and was returning with a slow step.

Irene regarded her from head to foot. She was beautiful — yes ; and cold and impassive. But perhaps she could be stirred, if artfully approached. Who could tell but a vulnerable spot might be found in this armor of pride?

Irene let two days pass by. A secret instinct of perversity had taught her, that to give things the appearance of truth it was necessary to allow them to retreat a little into the past, if it was only for forty-eight hours.

Thus, one evening on returning from the palace, Cleopatra found her sister in her room, seated near the bureau, upon which two or three reviews were lying and a novel that had been begun.

The first impression was disagreeable. It is very seldom that one is satisfied to find his room occupied, at least if it is not by some one that is the better half of himself. Besides, Irene had not entered the chamber of her sister twice since she had offered her the hospitality of her house. Seeing her there Cleopatra was seized with the presentiment of some evil.

"Waiting for me?" she said to her, with that impassiveness that was her great power.

"Yes, during the day you are on duty, or surrounded by so much society that I never have the opportunity to speak with you. At our repasts my husband is present, and what I have to say now will not admit of any witness."

In order to hold this discourse the young wife had taken on such a piteous, sweet voice that Cleopatra became alarmed.

But she betrayed nothing, and calmly seated herself opposite her sister.

"You are the oldest," began the little princess; "but I am married, which gives me the advantage of you, my dear sister. Now I have heard remarks that have not reached your ears, because there is conversation that does not take place in the presence of the person whom it concerns."

"Has any one said harm of me?" spoke Cleopatra,

slowly, placing her delicate hands, one upon the other, upon the edge of the table.

"Of you — no; yet things are said that might injure you — that would injure you, if there was not a stop put to this gossip; they say" —

"Plenty of 'they says,'" interrupted the young girl, without showing any emotion. "I presume those who speak evil of me are not those who are seeking to prevent it."

Pricked in her secret diplomacy, Irene blurted out the issue.

"In a word, since you are so incredulous, they say General Néoutof is much too familiar with you. You allow him privileges" —

"Irene!" cried Cleopatra, rising to her full height.

The princess appeared frail, and even niggardly, beside this magnificent statue, roused with indignation.

"You can ride the high horse if that please you," replied the malicious little person; "but that is what they say — and I add — with reason. These endless *tête-à-têtes* raise suspicions; and then he is seen to kiss your hand on every occasion" —

She might go on at her pleasure; her sister listened no longer. Irene's wicked words had plunged a steel into her heart that penetrated deeper and deeper; and she gave no heed to anything but the sharp pain that increased every second.

Then it was not enough to be spotless; one must

reject the most honorable homages. To please whom? — the world! The world did not occupy itself with that; and Cleopatra felt sure that the perfidious insinuation was the sole work of her sister.

What did she want,— this inexorable sister, of whom she had never sought any favor, who had offered her the shelter of her house, but who at present seemed to reproach her for not respecting it?

"Finally," she said, raising her eyes full of dignity, and where showed slight traces of tears, "what do you want of me?"

"That you marry," ejaculated Irene, in a brutal manner, rising to go.

"I don't wish to marry at present," said Cleopatra, weighing each word.

"Then you see that the gossiping tongues are not so very far from the truth, after all."

"How is that?" asked the young girl, with the same calm demeanor, but growing pale.

"If they say that you find it more advantageous to captivate the old Néoutof than to marry a man less rich" —

"Irene, you are mad!" cried Cleopatra, with a queenly air.

"No, indeed! Everybody knows that Néoutof at his age — and then — But if he is the gardener's dog, and hinders others from eating in his garden — Finally, my dear, a word to the wise. I want my house to be respected and re-

spectable, and I rely upon you to help me to make it so."

She effected a majestic leave-taking, and left her sister overwhelmed at the depth of her wickedness.

As soon as Cleopatra was sure she was alone, and that her sister would not return again, she dropped her face into her hands and wept.

She spared, however, all useless tears, for tears tarnish beauty. But for once her heart was wounded, and the wound would bleed.

These chats with Néoutof were a part of her life. She looked forward to them as her daily joy, — as all indigents in the world look forward to some daily pleasure. They were for her what the hour in the yard is to the prisoner, or the return home to the student. The hour that he passed with her she was queen, and honored by the attentions of a valiant knight. And more, he talked with her of the grand duke.

For the first time Cleopatra descended to the deepest recesses of her soul, and questioned herself directly: Did she love the grand duke?

At the beginning of this most improbable adventure she certainly did not love him.

It was only the steps to the throne that she sought to reach, since the throne itself was occupied.

Cleopatra was not of those who could infringe upon the sanctity of a home without scruples. Her own self-respect would have restrained her,

and, besides, this feat, that was always difficult, would become impossible when a divorce was essential.

Thus far she had only regarded Boris as a free prince, who could place her in a position that her ambition coveted. Later — well, yes, later she had become confused.

The regard that had disturbed the grand duke was not a clever play.

Caught in her own trap, by dint of seeking to inspire love in him, she had felt her own heart moved.

Was it really her heart? or, rather, was it not her head?

Ah! what did it matter? If he only loved her, — this man whose name was pronounced in all public prayers; before whom every head bowed, — this man who could, if fate ordained it, become in his turn sovereign of the immense empire — If he only loved her! In recognition, she would love him, and make him happier than any man on the earth had ever been. She despised love no longer; she venerated it, — not only as a power, but the dispenser of happiness. Was it not everything, since it could bestow everything?

She rose, bathed her burning face in fresh water, and opened the window to breathe.

The night was clear and almost golden, although it was nearly the middle of July.

The fragrance of the hay-stacks in the distance, and the firs from the forest, heated by the mid-

day sun, mingled together in a delicious manner. Cleopatra had a vision of the woods, where she would walk unrestrained with the man she loved some exquisite night like this.

She would be loved, and she herself would love.

"Oh! my prince!" she murmured.

Then suddenly it appeared as if something was fainting within her. She was not sure of loving Boris. It was not in the woods, in the midst of wild nature, that she could evoke this image. The vision refused to appear except in the gardens or lighted halls of the palace.

"And yet it is he that I wish," she said, closing the window.

CHAPTER VIII.

TAKING ADVICE.

THE next day Cleopatra rose early, to be sure of seeing her sister before she left the house. Charamirof ordinarily set out about eight to make the round of the barracks of his regiment. He was a brave fellow, and very conscientious.

At nine o'clock the tinkle of a bell warned the chamber-maid that she might enter the apartments of the princess. Half an hour later Cleopatra was announced.

Irene sat at a toilet-table, where the dressing of her hair was being completed. Perceiving her sister, she sharply dismissed her waiting-woman.

"What do you want?" she asked, in a tone as discouraging as possible.

"I wish to know what you demand of me. You forgot to tell me last night."

"What I want? There is no need of my telling you. You know as well as I do."

"Make as if I did not know, I pray you."

"Well, I wish you to cease encouraging the scandalously ridiculous courtship of that old mummy."

"Is it of General Néoutof that you are speaking?"

"Perfectly."

Cleopatra, who was standing, placed one finger upon the shoulder of her sister.

"Irene," she said, "you will notify my brother-in-law that at the close of this day I leave his house."

The princess rose in all her fury.

"I forbid it!" she cried, grinding her teeth with rage.

"I have no orders to receive from you."

"There you are mistaken. If you leave our house I will inform the whole world that it is to give yourself up without control to your shamefulness."

Cleopatra's fingers touched the cheeks of her sister, but softly; she restrained herself, though with extreme difficulty.

"If I should relate that I had given you a slap in the face," she said, "it might, perhaps, be true, — and yet no one would perhaps believe it."

Irene turned ashy-white.

"What did you say?" she said, so surprised she did not know what to think.

"I wish to say, sister, that insults from you to me are useless; if they remain between us, they have no effect. But if the world is let into the secret, it will either believe nothing, which would be doing us great honor, or there will be a most appalling scandal. Believe me, my sister, spare me, as well as yourself, words or deeds that would cause superfluous injury."

Irene dropped her head.

"But you must not go away from here."

"Why?"

"Because that would injure you."

It was true. Yet Cleopatra added that which was no less true.

"And then, your husband would never pardon you for having thus violated the hospitality of his house. Come, my sister, let us try to live together. It is a great sacrifice that we make to the world. Let us see at least that it rewards us for it. If it is painful to you, know that for me it is a thousand times more so, for I am poor."

She had reached the threshold.

"Remember, Cleopatra," said Irene, in her pitying tone, "that marriage alone will allow you to leave this house."

Cleopatra closed the door without replying.

She had made such an energetic effort to restrain herself that her body vibrated from head to foot with anger.

Twisting up her heavy locks beneath a little feather cap, she took her parasol, and directed her steps towards the park.

At this moving hour the palace clock had just struck ten; everything was in all its magnificent beauty. The cupola of the little Turkish bath shone like a precious stone, and the marble bridge seemed aerial — it stood out in such delicate relief against the background of the trees that were just then in all the splendor of their foliage.

The odor of the lindens filled the air like the smoke from burning censers. The emperor had such a predilection for this perfume that he invariably passed the time of the florescence of the quinconces at Tsarskoé-Sélo, to the end that he might enjoy to the fullest this quieting aroma.

Swans were swimming about on the lake where several barks traced their wake on its glassy surface.

One was not isolated in this immense garden, and yet one might enjoy solitude here.

Cleopatra had need of peace and quiet. She left the borders of the lake, where several promenaders, either alone or in groups, threatened her with idle meetings, and went towards an alley, seldom frequented, by the side of the great tower — false ruins — that forms one of the doors of the park. There she was very sure of seeing no one but children accompanied by their nurses.

The shade and freshness were appreciable even at this hour; for the sun had been shining for a long time in the blue sky. A soft breeze stirred the leaves, bringing at moments the tinkling of the bells, which were ringing for mass in all the churches of the little town.

With every step she took Cleopatra felt her anger soften, and sadness came to fill its place.

What misery to be poor! What misery not to be above this proud society, their made-up prejudices, swelled up with ridicule, whose arrests were more irrevocable than those of judges; for the

emperor may forgive, and who has ever been able to rise above censure pronounced by the world?

To be superior to all this, to brave unjust judgments, make a law for one's self, and then, having arrived at power, to be good and indulgent; to have pity for those that are misled, pity above all for those that are blemished; to extend the hand to those that are calumniated, and say, proudly, "That will be thus and so, because *I* wish it to be!" Would it never come, the day when a woman of heart, having suffered, might find herself in her turn among the dispensers of mercy and goodness?

"You are walking very fast, mademoiselle," said a voice near by that made her start.

He was before her, — he who could give her all. Escorted by his faithful white hound (that stopped also, his nose in the gloved hand), he considered her with a singular expression of interest.

She turned her moist eyes — eyes of a forlorn slave — upon those of her master, and dared to place her hand upon the head of the hound, who was looking at her kindly.

"You seem disturbed," he said, carried on with the need to know the answer to this living enigma. Who could tell? Perhaps she had just come from a quarrel with the one she secretly loved. Boris wished to know if she really loved in secret a man whose name he ignored.

"I have suffered some grief this morning," re-

plied she, slowly. "Your Imperial Highness is good, indeed, to have noticed it."

"*Vos beaux yeux ont pleuré!*" he said, smiling. He walked along slowly in the direction she was going; and the hound, his head bent low after the fashion of his race, followed them, as if he would kiss the track marked out by their steps.

"My life is unhappy," spoke Cleopatra, suddenly. She felt that there would never be another opportunity like this, and she must speak out. "It is the unhappiness of being poor and dependent — No, my lord," she added, with modesty that was very noble and natural, thus responding to a slight gesture from the grand duke, "I don't wish to be anything else but poor and dependent! To change dependence would be to step lower; at least, I depend now upon no one but my family."

He smiled faintly, and a slight movement of the head indicated that he was satisfied.

She continued: "But this dependence has sometimes its odious sides."

"Does any one torment you?"

"How could any one imagine to take it amiss, — the paternal affection that General Néoutof shows me?"

The grand duke smiled in earnest this time. "Néoutof! Néoutof, does he offend your relations? I never thought Charamirof such a fool."

"It is not he, my lord."

Boris understood, and ceased to laugh. He

knew what a malicious woman was capable of inventing.

"There is nothing serious," said he; "Néoutof is the most gallant man in the world."

"That is just the reason!"

"He admires you very much — You feel friendship for him?"

"Indeed! my lord. His conversations are among the most interesting I ever knew."

The grand duke recalled the fact that Néoutof had not spoken of Cleopatra since the little skirmish that they had had about her. Could it be true that the old man was capable of jealousy relative to his young friend?

If so, the poor man was greatly to be pitied, for Mlle. Bakhtof was not the girl to play the rôle of coquette, — that was evident.

"That which you tell me is to be regretted," said the duke, after a moment of silence. "I can see but one chance for you to escape from this difficult situation."

Cleopatra's eyes asked so plainly what this chance might be that the grand duke was forced to continue in spite of slight embarrassment.

"The way is so easy, that I cannot understand why you have not resorted to it long ago."

Finally, it had come: he was going to pronounce the phrase that would serve her as the point of departure for some definite words. Her heart beat so rapidly that she could hardly breathe.

"That which would withdraw you from the

arbitrary domination of your sister, if I have rightly understood, is marriage."

Cleopatra's eyes suddenly dropped, and the brightest carnation spread over her cheeks. For the moment she was so beautiful that Boris could never forget her.

"Marriage," she said, slowly, with that velvety voice, powerful and softened at the same time, which so richly completed the gifts that nature had bestowed upon her, — "marriage, certainly, my lord. A girl poor and proud as I am has no other resource than to sell herself legitimately to the highest bidder, even when her heart draws her elsewhere."

Boris in his turn felt his heart agitated.

"One marries the one he loves," he said, with a careless smile, intended to hide his uneasiness.

"Sometimes one cannot marry the one he loves," replied Cleopatra, placing her bare hand upon the head of the hound, which passed between them, as if to solicit a caress. "It is thus that one remains poor and dependent, with — one's secret."

The grand duke ought to have taken it as a warning; but the instinct of the man who always succeeds, the man who is almost a sovereign, and knows no obstacles, impelled him to go farther still.

"If it is a question of inferiority of fortune, perhaps that can be arranged," he said, kindly.

She shook her head.

"If it is inferiority of social position, there are also remedies for that," he continued; "but I can scarcely believe that you would look beneath you — although there are many young officers, still obscure, but not wanting in merit. I should like to do something for you."

She made one of those half-humble gestures by which one thanks sovereigns for their favors.

"Your Imperial Highness is full of kindness and delicate attention. General Néoutof has told me that, and I knew it before; but that kindness cannot help me."

He regarded her perplexed. Her beautiful face was covered with blushes, which contradicted her modest words.

"I regret it," he said, troubled. "I should like to see you happy with the husband of your choice."

"Would you — really — my lord?"

Her voice failed her, as Cleopatra herself almost fainted. He looked at her, and saw that she was deadly pale. He pitied her, but at the same time a lively satisfaction of self-love penetrated him through and through.

"I could have wished it," he said, "if your happiness had been in this union; but if it is not" —

"My kingdom is not of this world," murmured Cleopatra, whose pride would not surrender, even at this decisive hour.

The grand duke regarded her for a second with the eyes of a lover; and during this second he

loved her, indeed, passionately. She was in his hands; he was sure of it now; a word, and she would be his. He was tempted to try the test.

While he hesitated she became conscious of the danger she was running, for she was no longer sure that she might not succumb.

"I am proud, my lord," she said, gaining possession of herself. "My pride is my sole inheritance, with my honor. The two are inseparable; I shall suffer in silence, as I have suffered, and no humiliation will be able to crush me; for I am above offences, as you, my lord, are above us."

She courtesied low, and made a movement to depart, although it was contrary to etiquette. He extended his hand to restrain her.

"Wait a moment," he said, "I should really like to see you happy, for you deserve it."

"Happy!" she said, with a bitter smile; "you know not what you wish, my lord."

He was violently tempted to fold her within his arms and kiss those disdainful lips. He would not have been a man, if he had not suffered this emotion; but he was an honest man, and this foolish idea only passed through his brain.

"Allow me to say to you, mademoiselle, that I entertain for you sincere affection; my friend Néoutof, too, has done something for it, and you must know it, and if you ever have an occasion to test this affection I shall know how to show myself a friend."

"It is too great an honor, Your Imperial Highness," replied Cleopatra, bowing.

He bowed and left her with a quick step. His hound halted an instant, undecided whether to follow his master or remain beneath the beautiful hand that was caressing him; then he turned his head towards the grand duke, and rejoined him, slowly, his head down like some one who was not fully satisfied.

Neither Boris nor Cleopatra was satisfied. She looked with despair upon the lost occasion; he blamed himself for having said so much or so little. Soon, however, he thought of other things; but she did not cease to turn over and over in her head the slightest incidents of their conversation.

Little by little light broke in upon the mind of the proud girl. Was it not, after all, a prodigious thing that he should show such affection for her? It was no court gossip, but a friendly conversation, very intimate, with a friend who had willingly forgotten the distance that lay between them.

A friend; of course that was not much. Perhaps he had not understood, — occupied with other thoughts, — Cleopatra's veiled avowal. Later, he should understand; and she would know how to force him to it. For to-day it was enough that he had given her the assurance of his friendship.

She wished to blind herself, and she succeeded.

She returned home, eyes dazzling, lips half open, invigorated by her walk, transported, so to speak,

beyond this world, by this meeting. She saw the door to a new life opening before her.

Irene had had time to reflect, and the incredible conduct of her sister appeared to her in the open light of day. Cleopatra's fingers had grazed her cheek with the intention to insult her; she could no longer doubt it. It was not a caress, but a blow. Between men it is only necessary to indicate the gesture that the offence be considered as having taken place.

This penniless girl had forgotten the respect she owed her sister, who was younger, but rich. She deserved punishment, and Irene never recoiled from the necessity of doing an injury to others.

In waiting that her inventive genius or chance might suggest the means to strike a heavy blow at this enemy, — as much more hated as she was personally bound to her, — she contented herself in maintaining a haughty silence when they were alone, always preserving her usual attitude in the presence of Charamirof, who suspected nothing, and who would have blamed his wife severely if he had been aware of the truth.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LITTLE SEAL.

BREAKFAST was over, and the three table-companions were seated upon the terrace before the house, when a strange noise was heard in the street.

The Miserere from Trovatore was being ground out upon a street organ, accompanied by a bagpipe of doubtful nationality. Over all resounded, at irregular intervals, plaintive cries, resembling the wailings of a child.

Charamirof, a regular cockney by nature, could not resist the temptation to lean over the balustrade to learn the cause of these extraordinary sounds.

At the end of the street some peasants and working people were stationed before a baker's shop, around a little cart that was drawn by a rawboned horse.

The distance and the crowd prevented the prince from distinguishing what the cart contained ; but the shouts of laughter, which, at intervals, rose from the group of spectators, led him to think it must be something very amusing.

Kamoutzine appeared at the corner at this moment, and mingled in the crowd, which respectfully turned aside before an officer of the guards.

"Well," said Charamirof, "if Kamoutzine is in it, it must be something very funny."

The affair did not prove very amusing, however. The people scattered with shamed faces, and the trickster remained almost alone with the musicians and the proprietor of the cart.

"What!" said Kamoutzine, "are you not ashamed to make a poor beast suffer like this?"

"Your Honor," observed the driver, "it is to make it talk."

"To make it talk, you brute! Suppose we hold you at the mouth of the oven of that bakery; that would make you talk, eh?"

The three men looked at each other without daring to speak. Meantime the victim writhed in the dust of the street, and groaned plaintively.

It was a young seal, scarcely as large as a two-year-old child. Its moist eyes and good face expressed pain and fear, that made it an object of real compassion.

Kamoutzine had little pity for men, but he had love and tenderness for animals. He bent over the poor creature, that looked at him softly, and opened its mouth, without emitting a sound.

"What imbeciles you are!" said Kamoutzine, deliberately. "This animal must have cost you something, or else you have stolen it. It brings you money, and yet you are going to let it die for want of water. Some water! quick!"

"But, Your Honor, there is water in its basin."

It was a child's bath-tub, scarcely large enough

for the unhappy beast to turn over in. It contained about half a bucket of muddy, yellow water.

"That water? — you ought to be made to drink it!" said Kamoutzine, but without departing from his remarkable coolness of temper. "There is a fountain near here; borrow a bucket of that good man, the baker, — he will not refuse it, — and bring it to me full to the brim. Wash the tub, and fill it with fresh water. Quick!"

The bucket was brought speedily. Kamoutzine poured it cautiously upon the panting creature. As the water trickled down its body in fine streams the little seal revived, and showed signs of returning life. Washed of the dust which had covered it with a yellow crust, it appeared brilliant, almost black; it rose upon its tail, and of its own accord executed the balancing that it had been taught by blows from a stick.

"See, it dances all alone!" said the bagpiper; "it is because it is so contented."

"Yes, yes! you must be a lot of imbeciles, that I, an officer of the guards, should be obliged to teach you how to take care of a seal! Go, put it into its bath."

He was obeyed; and the little animal showed its joy in rolling over and over several times in the clear water, after which it placed its head upon the edge of the copper basin, and fixed its good and intelligent eyes upon Kamoutzine.

"Yes," said the officer; "you would like to embrace me, wouldn't you? In a minute, when

you are a little drier. Follow me, you folks; it is I who will show off your curiosities. If you say a word, I will have the seal taken away from you, for you have stolen it, I am convinced."

They said nothing, and followed him without resistance. The street was almost deserted; for, seeing an officer interfere in the affair, — it was that which invariably spoiled fun, — the spectators had returned home.

Charamirof had contemplated from afar, the goers and comers about the cart, without being able to fix upon the personality of the herd. When he saw Kamoutzine approaching, followed by this strange escort, he broke out laughing.

"A showman of bears, at present!" he cried from the top of the terrace. "That was all that was wanting to complete your glory."

"Not bears! a seal!" responded Kamoutzine, stopping. "Strike up your music, show what you can do."

The frightful uproar began; but after the second measure the officer gave a signal for it to stop.

"Enough; you are appreciated," he said. "And now, my young friend, present yourself to this honorable society, and also show what you are able to do."

The seal, warned by a gesture from his master, lifted its fine head from the bath-tub, and rose up with a comical balancing of the body.

Irene's ill-nature could not hold out against this. It was in deplorable bad taste; but Kamoutzine

and his *protégé* were very droll. Cleopatra smiled without saying anything.

"It was for that I saw you manœuvring about that cart!" said the prince. "Was that what you were brewing there — the purchase of that animal?"

"No, indeed!" responded Kamoutzine, in French. "I saved the creature's life giving it something to drink. You know it is written, 'Each glass of water will return to you a hundred-fold.' I prepare my paradise; for it is in bucketfuls that this one here has received of my gifts."

This irreverent joking caused Irene to frown; she was very orthodox. But Cleopatra let fall upon Kamoutzine a regard that was unusually kind. She felt her heart grow tender; the breastplate of indifference in which she was accustomed to attire herself fell to pieces; she felt that it was impossible always to live in disdain and ambition; sometimes the heart must melt — where it in tears. Her eyes were really moist when she thought that this joker, scarcely supportable, and only that because he was amusing; that this buffoon should have performed such an act, as not another person who belonged to his circle would have thought of, much less had the courage to carry out.

"Are you satisfied, miss?" asked Kamoutzine, whose penetrating eye had read her countenance.

"Yes, sir."

"It is too bad that the terrace is so high; I would climb up to kiss the end of your glove, but

the wall is of brick, and there is nothing to cling to."

"Heavens!" thought Irene, "if they are not ridiculous and disagreeable! Just see this Cleopatra, that flirts in the street with that clown."

But her husband laughed, and she dared not think aloud.

"Finally," said Charamirof, "what are you going to do with this interesting animal? — not quite the thing to keep in a parlor."

"I am going to present it to my friends and acquaintances."

He winked with his eye that was on the side towards the palace.

"You are not going to expose that object down there?" said Irene, completely horrified.

"Why not? It is better to appeal to God than to his saints. I have the notion to give it a career: it is my adopted son. You know these creatures can talk as well as we can, only they are wiser; they are distrustful, and choose well their confidants. It is just the reason why one never hears them. I have an idea. I am going to get it named privy counsellor, and have a special bath-tub constructed for it down at the end of the hot-houses. In eight days no one will think of it any longer, and it can philosophize at its pleasure. I shall go to see it, and it will give me advice and lessons of the highest wisdom, for it is not suspicious of me; are you, little one?"

The young seal listened to this medley of folly

and skepticism with an artless air, its head leaned against the border of its domicile; Kamoutzine looked into its eyes, as good and tender as a baby's, and felt an emotion that did not comport well with the circumstances. He suddenly took off his ordnance cap, and reached it towards the spectators on the terrace.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, don't forget this poor orphan, an exile into the bargain, — though not on account of its politics."

Charamirof, laughing harder than ever, drew from his pocket a handful of silver coin, and threw it into the cap. The proprietors of the seal watched this shower of silver with astonishment, and a look that plainly asked if the officer had the intention of keeping it all for himself, or to share a part of it with them.

"That — that will be yours later," said Kamoutzine, "if you behave yourselves. Come! start off."

The little cart rolled away in the dust, and this singular *cortége* disappeared around the first corner.

Kamoutzine's mirthfulness suddenly left him, and he turned away from the little seal without addressing it a word. He had given the money to its conductors.

"That will help him to soothe his creditors," said Irene, mockingly; she had left the balcony within a moment.

"O sister!" cried Cleopatra, indignant.

"Well! what! when one gets the grand duke to

pay his debts, one is capable of pocketing the money that he extorts from his friends under the pretext of benevolence."

"Irene, you are wicked sometimes," said Charamirof, who was always in good-humor. "I know it is only a jest; but there are jests that are hurtful."

The young wife never questioned her husband. She had early learned that submission is necessary towards those to whom one owes a situation.

She pouted, and at once smiled.

"Do see the villain, how he scolds me!" she said. "Oh, horror!"

Charamirof was still under the influence of the honeymoon, and he kissed the hand of his wife long and tenderly. Cleopatra withdrew without any affectation. What place was there for her with these two lovers?

Towards four o'clock General Néoutof appeared as usual. Irene had disposed her batteries well, in seating the first-comers in such a fashion as to block her sister into a corner, from whence it was impossible for her to extricate herself without executing a movement in and out among the seats. Preoccupied, the young girl had not paid attention to her sister's military manœuvres. She had no suspicion of the niggardly acts of life, and it was this disdain of defensive precautions that once had given her the reputation of being stupid.

The moment Néoutof entered Cleopatra understood the wise stratagem that had deprived her, for that day, of the possibility of conversing with her

old friend. She never shrank from any action that she considered wise and proper. Without showing too much vivacity, with her habitual dignity the young girl rose, left the group, and the moment that Néoutof was bowing himself before the mistress of the house, she stood behind him, so that when he turned to seek a place they met.

Irene's eyes flashed lightning at Cleopatra; but the interview of the morning had given new force to the latter; without being disturbed by the regards of her sister, or the changed voice that she betrayed in speaking with her guests, she conducted the general quietly aside, towards two arm-chairs in rattan, that were designed for the *tête-à-têtes* of Charamirof with his wife.

"It is really an elopement," said Irene, with that peculiar voice, neither high nor low, that can be heard so very far.

The guests smiled benevolently. Who would have taken it into his head to question the friendship of Néoutof for the beautiful maid-of-honor?

Cleopatra had heard, and was all the more decided to act as she had previously resolved. When she had installed the general, who walked with pain, comfortably in his seat, she regarded him a moment with a strange expression, mingled with pity, regret, and affection. He, happy, warmed himself in the sun, and tasted the joy of being near her.

"General," said Cleopatra, "my sister has just said that I have run away with you."

"That is only too flattering to me," responded he; his voice was a little thick.

Beneath his white brows his deep brown eyes regarded the young girl with inexpressible satisfaction.

"It was not thus for me," she said. A little bitterness, badly restrained, caused the corners of her haughty mouth to twitch. "You could never believe what my sister invented last evening against me."

"What could it be? Isn't your sister on good terms with you?" said the old man, in a tone that did not betray so much astonishment as one might suppose from the form of his question.

Without replying directly, Cleopatra continued: "They pretend, it appears, general, — it is that mysterious *they*, charged with all the faults in the world, of which I speak, — *they* pretend that your friendship for me is prejudicing people against me."

Nécutof started. What! Again! This ridiculous accusation, — was it to follow him always? A man of seventy-two, could he not be allowed the innocent joy of the society of a young person, as honorable as beautiful; was the malice of a single woman to put cruel obstacles in his way?

"I hope," he said, with a changed voice, "that you do not allow yourself to be moved by any remarks like that?"

She replied with a beautiful smile, and placed her white hand upon the arm of his chair.

"Moved, no!" she said. "Indeed, general, I respect you too much to be influenced by anything of that sort. But — excuse the frankness of my words — they have made it a necessity for me to abandon these conversations, which are the greatest pleasures of my life."

"And of mine also," cried Néoutof, greatly moved. "What! deprive me of your society, when you are the joy, the sun, of my departing days? What cruelty! What infamy!" he added still lower.

Real tears, small, and, so to speak, concentrated, were seen in his eyes, weary with work and care. Cleopatra turned away her head. She felt her own eyes moisten, and she did not wish to give her sister (who was watching her closely, without, however, hearing) the satisfaction of knowing how sharp her pain was.

"General," continued Cleopatra, "do not be sad, I pray you; it rends my heart. Your friendship is infinitely precious to me; it honors me as much as it is dear to me. I cannot give it up. I will never give it up! If my sister is wanting in respect to you, and banishes you from this house, it is her affair. As to myself, I have but one thing to say, whatever may be the consequences to me, I shall always keep the same affection for you; as pure, as bright, as the sun that shines upon us, and nothing can make me change."

The regular features of Cleopatra's face were animated as she spoke with a beauty so new to

Néoutof that he remained mute before her. He rose up from his chair without help; an extraordinary animation restored him his vigor, and he no longer felt his infirmities. Scarcely supporting himself with his cane, he stood up before Cleopatra.

"Mademoiselle," he said, with a voice strangely young and vibrating, "I am an old man, who has no longer any pretensions to the things of this life. My youth has been consecrated to my country and my sovereign. I have never been fine-looking. It would be ridiculous on my part to expect to be anything to women other than a friend, perhaps a guide. Now, I have never been, as I am aware of, ridiculous."

He had straightened himself up, his eyes glistened, and his little figure seemed as tall as that of Boris.

"I could not, then, without being as odious to myself as to others, pretend to play the rôle of a lover. But if, such as I am, with my imperfections and my faults, you will do me the honor of accepting my hand, I will be, up to the day of my death, — which is probably not far distant, — the most faithful and the most devoted of your servants."

He bowed, as he terminated his words, with all that traditional grace which made people say, in speaking of him: "One can see plainly enough that he was once page to the great Catharine."

Cleopatra rested amazed. This offer was so little expected that surprise dominated every other

emotion. Standing with his head uncovered, Néoutof waited her response.

"Truly," she said, "I do not know what to say. The honor you pay me"—

"Let go all useless words," he said, returning instantly to the real world, and becoming a man with a clear vision and accurate impressions. "If you love — if you love a man that you can marry," replied he, with a reticence discreet, though marked, "then I have nothing to say. I will be the friend of your husband, as I am yours. But if the situation which you have here is unbearable, as I believe; if you have never, as it appears to me, given encouragement to any one, then take into consideration the proposal that I humbly lay at your feet. I shall die soon, Cleopatra," he added, without evincing any emotion at the thought of this necessary event. "You will be left a widow, young, beautiful, and rich; for what would my fortune be worth if it did not serve to make you happy? Then you will marry an amiable man, that you will choose at your leisure. And now and then you will bless the memory of your old husband, who will have given you that which he did not have himself, the happiness of loving and being loved without other anxiety."

He spoke mirthfully, with his ordinary voice, and Cleopatra did not know what to admire the most, his generosity or that pleasant philosophy which permitted him to speak of himself as he would have done had it been another.

"General," she said at last, "I am so surprised at the words you have addressed to me that I am not able to reply at once. Will you give me twenty-four hours to think it over?"

"Quite right!" replied he, bowing with that extreme deference which rendered him so agreeable to women.

"Twenty-four hours is, indeed, a long time," said Cleopatra; "I hope to be able to reply sooner."

"For your own interest," he observed, "I cannot urge you too much to hasten your decision. At the point you have reached with your sister, as it seems to me, great haste would be the best means to elude disagreeable remarks. And if we are not to see each other again," he added, with a sigh, "it is all the better that I know it soon. Not, understand me, that I intend to play the lover about you, but I have so accustomed myself to the sweet pleasure of seeing and hearing you that, if I am to renounce it, let the sacrifice come now. If you reply No, I shall return immediately to my old residence in the country. I have down there an aviary of nightingales that feel lonely, perhaps, that I do not return."

He bowed to her for the last time, and going to Irene, to whom he addressed some excuses for his hurried departure, retired as modestly as was his wont.

Cleopatra had neared the circle without noticing the regards of her sister, cruel and piercing as the point of a gimlet. She did not seek to hide the

preoccupation that had taken possession of her. Of what consequence was it to her, at present, malice and sarcasm? She had within her hands the means to reduce it all to ashes.

But her dream! what had become of it? The interview that morning with the duke, which, after reflection, had rather encouraged than destroyed her hopes, was it to bear no fruit?

The slightest word of this talk had passed again and again through her mind; and things did not appear so encouraging. He had wished to see her married to another. This other might be young and obscure. The scales fell from Cleopatra's eyes. She had applied another meaning, not the real, to these plain, open phrases of good-will, but good-will only. She had allowed herself to be deceived. It was clear now; and the dream born of her youthful pride floated away in smoke towards the blue sky.

They talked with her. She replied without taking account of what they said, or the words that came from her lips. The experience of society may supply attention in such circumstances, and no one perceived that her soul was absent.

At last the company had departed; Irene had conducted the last visitor to the door of the salon, and returned to the terrace, where her sister remained sunk in painful meditation.

"Well, you had plenty of it to-day," she said, with a most insulting manner; "I hope you have advanced your affairs."

"More than you think," replied Cleopatra, leaving her.

Néoutof had left, his heart throbbing like a youth of twenty. The emotions that the beautiful maid-of-honor had awakened within him were more complex than he would have been willing to admit even to himself.

He had fancied he felt for her only the friendship of an old man for a charming creature; something like the affection of an uncle for a niece. But deep within himself he knew that an uncle was not jealous, and that the blood did not mount to his face in thinking of his niece.

Indeed, Néoutof was jealous. Cleopatra's behavior had not appeared to him to be that of a person whose heart was free. There was a presentiment of some mystery in the way in which she had received an offer, which for an indifferent girl ought to have been a benediction.

While his horses bore him about the park (where he took his daily drive before dinner) he sought within his mind, singularly clear and active, for the causes that could have awakened this jealousy. Suddenly light appeared to him.

It was the day after the grand duke had joked him in regard to Cleopatra that Néoutof had felt this uneasiness, forerunner of jealousy! Kamoutzine had been named, but at the thought even of Kamoutzine Néoutof shrugged his shoulders. Boris, himself, then?

The general gave an order to his coachman to

turn his horses about, and twenty minutes later he was at the door of the palace. The grand duke had just returned, and upon his demand consented to see him. Néoutof mounted the stairway bravely; he did not remember ever having had the gout, and as he entered the presence of his imperial friend his cane sounded upon the inlaid floor like that of the beadle of a cathedral.

"Delighted to see you, my old friend," said Boris, with the affectionate indolence of a man somewhat weary of everything. "What good wind blows you hither?"

"I have taken the liberty to disturb your Imperial Highness," replied Néoutof in a deep, sonorous voice, "because I have to communicate to you some news of the highest importance — to me only."

"Really! be seated then, dear friend."

The veteran sat down in an arm-chair, crossed his two hands upon the head of his cane, and regarded Boris to the very depths of his eyes.

"I have just committed the greatest folly of my life, or the greatest act of wisdom, according as circumstances decide the case."

"It must be either very wise or very foolish," said the grand duke, smiling, "for I have never known you to do anything half-way."

"Your Imperial Highness shall judge. I have offered to marry Cleopatra Bakhtof."

Boris started and regarded the count with attention. Their eyes crossed, and this double look

was sustained with equal firmness on the part of both. Each felt the profound esteem of the other. The features of Néoutof relaxed. He looked more like himself: but he suddenly appeared very much older.

"There is no need of asking if you have well thought about it," said the grand duke with extreme solicitude.

"I haven't thought at all," interrupted the general, with vivacity. "This person, as beautiful as she is intelligent, is unhappy. Her sister, as she appears to me, is a sort of speckled magpie."

"Tufted, then," said Boris, smiling, "for she adores dressing."

"Plumed or not, it is a malicious little fool, and the life of Mlle. Bakhtof is no better than that of hell. I had pleasure when seeing her, and they made a crime of the friendship that I show her. She is without fortune, but from a good family. Her father was a brave man, who served for a time under my orders. In marrying her I shall repair a social injustice. I only regret that I am not forty years younger."

"General," said the grand duke, "you are a great man, that I know; but you are good — that renders me very happy."

Néoutof bowed silently. He felt some restriction, — a mystery, — something unexplainable in the attitude of his host.

"Personally I feel the greatest interest in Mlle.

Bakhtof," continued Boris, slowly feeling his ground, for he did not know whether Cleopatra had the intention or not to hide the fact even of their meeting that morning. "I have spoken to her in a way to make her feel that she has a friend in me, and I hope she has understood me. If it was an ordinary person, the act that you intend would be absurd. But, with the qualities possessed by Mlle. Bakhtof, it is for her a most honorable solution of her difficulties; and for you it is the assurance of a most amiable companion."

Néoutof listened and did not feel entirely reassured. All that the grand duke had said did not prove to him that he entertained no sentiment other than a lively friendship for Cleopatra.

"There are," he said, with a voice slightly harsh, "marriages of such a character that they bring shame to both families. I can't allow mine to be of that class. I have offered myself to Mlle. Bakhtof; she will not accept me, I am convinced, if she does not feel absolutely free from all engagements, whether moral or material, no matter with whom they may be."

"Then she has not accepted?"

"She has asked for twenty-four hours for thinking it over."

"That is better, certainly, from every point of view — Well, my friend," continued Boris, laying his hand upon Néoutof's arm, whom he had approached, "she will marry you, and she will

give you all the happiness that her beauty and grace are able to bring to a house."

Néoutof rose and once more turned his piercing eyes upon those of the grand duke.

"I cannot afford to be ridiculous," he said; "but, if ever she repents of what she has done, I shall exact of her the fullest confidence. I am old; life is of little value to me. I would die to set her free; but I could never be one of those court butts, under the cover of which intrigues are carried on."

Boris extended his hand; it was loyal to his old friend.

"The character of Mlle. Bakhtof is to you a guarantee for the future as well as the present. As for myself, Néoutof, I wish you the happiness that you deserve. Please to say to your *fiancée* (for I do not doubt but she will be that to-morrow) that I shall be happy to serve her as *père d'honneur* at her wedding."

The general, wholly reassured at last, pressed heartily the hand of his friend, and left, carrying a high head, and his cane echoing behind him.

After his departure Boris remained thoughtful. Through the open window he could perceive the summit of the great tower, near to which he had met Cleopatra this morning. The whole surrounding space was white with the tops of the trees and gilded by the sun. The fragrance of the lindens entered in puffs mingled with that of roses. Languidness of the whole being succeeded the action

that had been kept up during the day. It was not evening, — it was scarcely half-past five, — but the emotions of this day had brought fatigue. Boris leaned upon his desk and watched the delightful landscape, at the same time picturesque and artificial; made to suit the fancy of a sovereign family in the country.

He would have liked to be free from every care, go away alone, and wander in the forest contiguous to the park; to render to no one any account of his actions; to have no duties except with himself. Cleopatra loved him still.

"I am an ungrateful wretch," he said, after an instant. "Really I am as free as the first peasant that comes. Duties that vex me are with myself; but, prince or peasant, I could not escape my destiny. Farewell, Mademoiselle Cleopatra; a day will come when you will love another. That day you will find out that I acted like a fool; — perhaps also you will think I am an honest man. You will weep, curse me a little, marry Néoutof, and spend a great deal of money. That is a way to be happy — that!"

He smiled in his thoughts; then rose and made the tour of this empty room. It was not his ordinary abiding-place, and there were very few familiar objects about him. He entered his sleeping apartment and returned with a precious book that he carried respectfully. It was a copy of the Evangelists, in Slavonic, upon vellum. The binding, worked in gold, was ornamented with medal-

lions in enamel, representing the four evangelists, and in the middle, Christ, preaching, with his hand raised. The volume was not so large but it could be placed upon a table, and serve for prayers.

Boris took a pen, opened the sacred book, and upon the first page wrote, "To Cleopatra Bakhtof, from Boris."

The sovereign signature, beneath the name of the young girl! It was the first time that their names had ever been seen in such close proximity.

Once more, upon the occasion of the marriage, would he be obliged to sign as witness, and then Cleopatra Bakhtof would be nothing, nothing more to the Grand Duke Boris.

He himself placed the book in its casket, called an *ordonnance*, and had the present taken immediately to Cleopatra.

Charamirof liked to dine early; they were just leaving the table as the messenger arrived from the palace.

The heavy package was presented to Cleopatra, as coming from the grand duke, in the presence of her sister and her half-brother.

Her heart beat wildly as she tore off the cover from the casket. What could he have sent her thus publicly? An instant there came the foolish idea of a crown; but as the casket opened, and she saw the images of the saints, she understood and turned pale. Her dream, already crumbling, was reduced to ashes. He had put God between her

and him, to be sure that their honor be kept sacred.

"What does that mean?" asked Irene. "Are you as familiar as that with the grand duke?"

Cleopatra had opened the book to her name; she closed the volume, and said, with a firm voice: —

"That means that I am to marry Count Néoutof, and this is a wedding present from his friend."

CHAPTER X.

BETROTHED.

IRENE remained motionless beneath the unexpected blow. Of all imaginable things this had been the least thought of. She could not tell at first, whether she ought to rejoice at a change, that would place Cleopatra, when married, in a most difficult position, in a world where everything gets known, even and principally that which does not exist; or, whether she ought to deplore a marriage that would give to this sister a rank, a title, and a fortune, almost equal to that which she possessed herself.

Besides, Cleopatra would partake of the high esteem which was attached to General Néoutof; and in a court very hierarchical that was a matter of great importance.

Cleopatra, was she going to take the precedence of the Princess Charamirof? They would probably name her Lady of the Palace. At this thought Irene paled with rage.

But she soon reflected that this beautiful prospect had a dark side, and it was for her a source of consolation.

The first and easiest thing to do was to tease Cleopatra about the age and infirmities of her

future husband. So, while Charamirof had gone to walk off his stupefaction at the mess of the officers of the guards, the little princess stole softly to the table in the salon where her sister was just finishing the writing of a note, and, taking up a piece of tapestry, she began to embroider, peacefully waiting to seize an occasion.

That was not long. The note was duly sealed and passed to the footman, with an order to take it to the person to whom it was addressed, — Count Néoutof.

"Already a correspondence?" demanded Irene, maliciously. "Then you didn't say all this afternoon?"

"I have informed my bridegroom of the honor the grand duke has just accorded me," replied Cleopatra.

It was not strictly true; of course the present was mentioned in the letter, but in reality this was the acceptance, in proper form, of the proposal that had been left in suspense up to this moment.

"You will have a fine wedding!" said Irene, threading her needle with a careless air.

"I suppose so," said Cleopatra, unmoved.

"But, my dear, where will you get your money to buy your trousseau?"

"I shall have none at all. Later, I will purchase what I need."

"But you will at least want a wedding-dress?" insinuated the little princess, delicately.

"Oh, Aunt Bakhtof has saved something for that! At least it is what she said to me when she bought yours."

Irene bit her lips.

"Finally, we can boast, both of us, of having been married for our beautiful eyes. Simple poverty, and nothing else! Only I — I married the man I loved; that makes quite a difference."

It was too true, this statement, and Cleopatra did not reply. She had resolved not to quarrel with her sister, let her say what she would.

"After all," replied Irene, "there is no accounting for tastes."

She gave a short, sarcastic laugh. "That which is the most astonishing is that the general should have committed such a folly."

"Folly?" demanded Cleopatra, unmoved.

"Evidently. It is a husband to make one laugh — or cry. No one will be such a fool — except him, perhaps — to believe that you are going to harness yourself to that little crippled old cart, and consider his happiness before everything else. When one marries under such circumstances everybody knows what it is for."

"And what is it for? You know, Irene, I am ridiculously ignorant."

"Ah! indeed! It is to plan one's existence after one's taste."

Cleopatra did not appear to have understood.

"Apropos," said Irene, "tell me — I did not know that you were so intimate with the Grand

Duke Boris. Is that something new — that — or is it a secret?"

The haughty Cleopatra felt the blow; her sister had touched the vulnerable spot in her breastplate of pride.

"Neither the one or the other," replied she; "but you are generally so occupied in seeing what is not, that you fail to see what is. For a long time the Grand Duke Boris has been a friend to me. This very morning, having met him, I informed him how painful to me is my residence in this house."

"You told him that," said Irene, reddening with anger.

"Why should I have hid it? He is a true friend, who might be useful to me. He was touched with my unhappy situation, and, perhaps, it is he who has inspired the general with the thought to take me out of it."

Again the truth suffered a slight wrench; but Irene was not one of those persons to whom it was wise to speak frankly; such, at least, was the opinion of Cleopatra. Any way, the argument was well invented, for it immediately cleared up the mystery of Néoutof's extraordinary offer.

The little princess was beaten. Like all persons of her sort she wished to pass herself off as being extremely good, indulgent, and charitable. The thought that her true character might possibly have been exposed to one of the imperial family was something frightful, yet her mischievous

tongue would still give itself the pleasure of a repartee.

"Be the choice good or bad," she said, biting her lips, "your protector might have found you a husband more — how shall I express it? more — or less — well, some other husband than that old gouty individual. He don't represent very much, your lover, you know that, Cleopatra. It would be very foolish to flatter yourself upon that point. Your marriage will excite much laughter."

"I fear, rather, that it will win me the most profound commiseration, who would have been forced to accept him to escape your hospitality."

Speaking so, she rose to go out.

The messenger returned with a laconic note from Néoutof.

"Thanks," said he, "I shall come to-morrow to render to you my gratitude. I kiss your hands."

Cleopatra retired to her room, — this coveted room that soon she would restore to her sister, who there could spread out the whole paraphernalia of her wardrobe. Seated before her mirror, she recalled the thoughts that had kept her company the night of Irene's wedding. What a dream that was, and how fate had mocked her!

With the cruelty of youth, that is ignorant, yet believes it knows all, she had commanded her heart to be still; she had decided to be a strong-minded woman, whose intellect would be served by her magnificent figure. Behold how fate had

traced out a different route! She did not know whether to blush at her former error or to weep over it. "Thou wilt not love, had she commanded to herself, thou wilt only ensnare others by the power of thy queenly beauty."

But her soul was softened; love had touched her with its wing; it had not entered her heart, but the imagination had been waylaid, and something in her — Cleopatra did not know what — had been troubled, which could not be brought to calm. It was not the senses; it was flattered vanity, perhaps the necessity of being loved, which inclines all creatures towards each other in this world. The self-love of the young girl was certainly flattered when she saw the name of Boris on the page of the Evangelists; but a better emotion than self-love struggled within her.

"I would have loved him well," she said, without restraining the tears, forgetting that only a little while ago she had said, "I never will love."

Well, her life was marked out. As she had said to Kamoutzine — how far away was that day of Shrove Tuesday, and yet the year was far from having finished its course! — as she had said, she would be a reproachless bride, because virtue is the greatest of all powers.

She looked in the mirror at her deep eyes, where some men had gone astray, and she saw she was beautiful, more beautiful and more troubling than ever before. Yes, love had grazed her with its wing, and she preserved the magic brilliancy that

it gives to those it touches. Such as she was, Cleopatra saw that a new life was opening before her.

Her marriage would in no way change the conditions of her inner life. Realities would all be as strange to her as they were at that hour. An enigma would float above her, rendering her more desirable, more irritating, and everything would be permitted her, — long private interviews, the most exasperating, discourses that intoxicate, and answers that bring despair. Henceforth she held within her hands an arsenal to be feared!

An angry emotion made her tremble. What fools and cowards the men that had disdained her! Except Kamoutzine, a profligate, almost a scapegrace, no other had ever dared to offer her his hand. The old count, alone, had not retreated before the responsibility of giving his name to this noble, pure, beautiful girl. She despised them from all her splendor. Let them come now to offer her their homages. Those that had withdrawn at the thought of marrying the maid-of-honor would pay dear for their insolent declarations to the Countess Néoutof.

This thought led her again to Boris. If he had wished it, what a wife she would have made him! But he had not wished it.

The grand duke had judged her falsely when he had said perhaps she would rail at him for having rejected the treasure that had offered itself to him.

Cleopatra possessed a higher, more worthy soul.

Taking his Evangile she turned over the leaves. By chance her eye fell upon the following verse:—

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you."

Perhaps it had been opened many times at this spot by an unsteady hand for a soul-seeking repose. Cleopatra slid down upon her knees before the sacred text, and the tears fell free from any bitterness or reproach.

"Peace be with you," she said; "you, who could have deceived me as others may deceive; ruined me as others may ruin. Peace be with you, who esteemed me too highly to treat me as a plaything, but have treated me as a friend. Peace be with you, my Lord Boris."

She rose, and, placing her right hand upon this sacred book, pronounced a vow: "I swear to God almighty, to be an honest, loyal wife, and never be guilty of any deceit or fraud towards my husband."

Her tears had ceased; she kissed the book and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XI.

A SPLENDID BRIDE.

THE announcement of this marriage burst like a rocket in the midst of the select society of the town. What! Cleopatra marry the old Néoutof! — burdened with years, rheumatism, and glory?

"For once she might well be named the '*belle indifférente*.'" said a gallant long ago rejected, though he had not exactly presented himself as a marrying man.

The word spread like wildfire, perhaps because it was dull, and within twenty-four hours there was not a house in Tsarskoé-Sélo, or Pavlosk, where it had not been repeated half-a-dozen times.

Madame Bakhtof returned from the depths of the country. Cleopatra's letter had thrown her into the greatest consternation and melancholy. Could it be that this charming girl, whose worth she had always appreciated, would consent to a marriage which was the renouncement of all family joys for an indefinite period of time? The constitution of the general authorized the belief that he would live to a very advanced age. Cleopatra might not be a widow till after having passed into her thirties or forties.

The excellent woman used every entreaty with

her niece, but in vain. The young girl related to her — without extenuating anything — all she had suffered on the part of Irene.

Madame Bakhtof, while she found some explanation for this resolution, — which seemed little short of suicide, — never ceased to show the victim how much more reasonable it would be to wait for a union more proportionate to her age.

"Talk as much as you please, dear aunt," responded Cleopatra, one day. "You married the man you loved. I — I never have pretended to anything of the sort."

Madame Bakhtof insisted no longer; either she was repelled by so much obstinacy, or she might have guessed in her heart that her niece was harboring some secret disappointment that she would never disclose to the world.

Of all the court, and the entire universe, it was the empress who took the announcement of this ill-sorted marriage the most seriously. Her honest soul was repelled by such an arrangement so like a bargain. Ignoring the motives that had influenced the young girl to take this step, she could not understand that which appeared to her to be solely ambition for wealth.

She had her maid-of-honor brought into her presence, and spoke to her with great sincerity.

"You are wrong," she said. "If you are set upon marriage I could have found a husband younger and more in harmony with your surroundings."

"Your Majesty is too good," replied Cleopatra. "Count Néoutof is a friend such as one would scarcely meet in a lifetime. I am confident that I shall be perfectly happy in the discharge of my duties at his side."

"But, miss," cried the empress, "a friend is not a husband."

Cleopatra dropped her eyes. The repetition of this phrase — which she heard too often — had the power to rouse her ill-will. She could only hide, the best she might, this disagreeable impression, and, with a calm face, she kept silent.

"You need not rely upon me to relieve you of this embarrassment, if ever you find yourself caught in the trap that you have set for yourself," said her sovereign, in a dry tone. "One may feel pity for women who are victims of cruel circumstances, such as an erring husband; but you have been warned, and if ever you are unhappy you have no one to call to account but yourself."

Tears sprang to Cleopatra's eyes. It seemed hard to be thus treated, since she had only one desire: to bury her youth and her foolish hopes beneath the moral obligations of a marriage which was the renouncement of all, except rank and fortune.

"May Your Majesty forgive me," she said, but without being able to master her trembling voice. "I know what I accept, and I accept it willingly. Perhaps Your Majesty, who observes everything, has already remarked that the attentions of men

do not move me. My life has been very sad. Between marriage and the convent I have chosen marriage."

"Which will permit you, some day, to return to that which you disdain to-day," interrupted the empress, with a shade of bitterness. "Yet if it is so, you are not so guilty. I should have liked, however, to keep you among my maids-of-honor; but you are free. May God be with you!"

The voice of the sovereign had softened.

Cleopatra kissed the hand respectfully which restored her her liberty and departed, but with an air so calm and haughty that, from the moment she crossed the sill of the door, no one would have thought of examining her eyes, where the traces of tears still glistened.

The marriage was fixed at the earliest possible date. The Feast of Assumption did not authorize it to be celebrated before the fifteenth of August; therefore the sixteenth of August was chosen; and the bridegroom at once sent the wedding presents to the young girl, which were so rich and perfect that they furnished talk for the whole of St. Petersburg for a long time afterwards.

A month may be long or short according to the disposition of the one who watches the time pass.

For Néoutof and Cleopatra these thirty days glided slowly by. A sort of fever made both wish to see them end, in the hope that there would be no more talk. Disguised railleries, cutting

sarcasms beguiled in politeness, spared neither one nor the other.

For Cleopatra words had a double meaning, which she was constrained to appear not to understand. With the general more prudence was employed, for it was well known that he was a man capable of giving a slap in the face or a thrust with his sword — one as soon as the other — to any ill-meant jokes. But all these compliments, exaggerated beneath the appearance of sincerity, scratched sometimes the sensitive epidermis of this old veteran.

Kamoutzine kept silent to a degree that was very extraordinary to those who knew him. The attitude of the grand duke, his master, commanded it of him officially; but who had ever seen Kamoutzine really obey an order coming from his superiors? Under a feint of submission was there not always to be found a disguised bravado?

Nothing of the sort now: discipline seemed to seal his lips. In reality he was in despair. This catastrophe, of which he had never dreamed, seemed to be a plunge into an abyss. He had shared all Cleopatra's illusions; more than once he had even had faith in her success, — what he termed success was not the dream of the audacious young girl; he had never believed for a moment that she would be called to share the position of the grand duke; but he had said to himself that in a morganatic marriage there would be nothing unreasonable, after all; that this solution would suit

his master very well, — who was a little romantic by nature, — and that, for want of any other, the ambitious beauty would be led to content herself with it.

All had vanished; and, that which was the most exasperating to Kamoutzine, he could not learn what had passed. Boris had not said a word, and Cleopatra shunned every occasion to see him alone. It was useless for the clever courtier to exert himself; he could learn nothing, and he became ill-tempered. He had never understood how extravagant had been his hopes till the day when he saw his hopes fail.

The sixteenth of August arrived at last. In the palace church was a crowd of brilliant officers in gold-lace trimmings, and ladies in grand toilets. At the door the Grand Duke Boris met the bride, whose arrival had been announced to him the moment she alighted from her carriage. He bowed before her, took her hand, and led her to the Gospel-pulpit, where Count Néoutof met her. Not a word, not a look, not the slightest quivering of their hands, betrayed that they had ever thought of each other. They parted before the altar, after Boris had given up to Néoutof the bride that henceforth was to be his. The grand duke withdrew a little to one side, and Cleopatra did not see his face again till the end of the ceremony.

Obeying a wish of the general, formally expressed, she was arrayed that day in a strange, original toilet, which set out most admirably her

style of beauty. The front of her dress — a white watered silk — was thickly sewed with all the ancient jewels of the Néoutof family, which had been put among her marriage gifts by her suitor. The heavy stuff, rigid beneath this load of diamonds, fell in folds, draping the statuesque form, like a byzantine *icône*.

A crown of orange-blossoms, in the form of a diadem, sprinkled with flowers of diamonds, made one think, at first view, of a Russian kakochnik. It was indeed the full dress of an empress, and the beauty of the one that wore it was truly sovereign.

"Ah," said a superstitious person, "she has put on pearls!"

Now, pearls in Russia are considered as emblematic of tears, and they are carefully banished from all marriage toilets. Cleopatra, however, was not accessible to such childlike terrors. Great cords of pearls followed her low-cut corsage, were wound about her arms, and fell in fringed epaulets from her shoulders. They were the legendary pearls of Néoutof, and since the death of his mother, sixty years ago, had never seen the light of day.

"She is too beautiful," said one, receiving the general impression — "too beautiful, and too rich."

"Don't invoke evil," said the superstitious lady, timidly.

"It is not necessary to call it," replied a ready tongue. "Misfortune can come very well alone. See if she is not a widow within less than a year."

"Ha, ha!—that would be no great misfortune, perhaps," replied a fourth.

It was true Cleopatra was too beautiful. Beneath her veil of English point lace was visible the rose of her cheeks, colored by emotion, and perhaps also by the physical effort imposed by the weight of her dress. The ceremony took its usual course, but no one could cease speaking of this beautiful bride—such as had never been seen before. She stood immovable by the side of her husband. One would have said she was marble, without the striking color and the extraordinary brilliancy of her eyes.

She executed all the prescribed movements slowly, with that dignity which rendered her still more imposing, as if she played the part of a queen in some pompous tragedy. And really it was this part that she acted. He who had scorned her should see how she could have held her place by the side of a half-sovereign. It was for him that she had dressed herself in pearls and diamonds; it was for him that she fulfilled with so much majesty the solemn rites of marriage. He should see her in all her splendor, and realize what he had lost.

Did he realize it? She knew nothing. Cleopatra walked three times around the sacred desk, her hand in that of her husband; but she saw not one of the multitude of faces that surrounded her.

Her regard had the fixedness of ecstatic eyes. The deep blue balls, whose dilated pupils doubled

the depths, looked without seeing. When the ceremony was concluded,

"Kiss each other," said the priest.

She bent towards her husband, — whom she towered above by at least a head, — and his lips just touched the red lips that were presented to him.

"It is the first and last time," he said, in French, with some show of military gallantry; "excuse me, it is indispensable."

They were led before the holy images, where they prostrated themselves duly, and were immediately congratulated by the crowd of friends and acquaintances. First of all Boris bent over Cleopatra's hand, which was still ungloved from the ceremony, and kissed it.

"I congratulate you, madame," he said, with that deep, grave voice that comes from the depth of hearts, and which she had not heard since their interview by the tower. How long ago it seemed! And yet scarcely a month had passed.

"I thank Your Imperial Highness," she said; "I thank you also for all your kindness!"

For the first time she raised her eyes to his; and in this regard, which he was awaiting with certain uneasiness, he read no grief, no reproach; only the calm resolution of a woman who had traced for herself a way in life, and would know how to follow it.

CHAPTER XII.

A WEDDING FESTIVAL.

THE mansion occupied by Néoutof was illuminated from base to summit. Even the sidewalks of the street were resplendent with lamps placed upon the ground.

Dashing equipages rattled noisily, for the general had invited every one worth mentioning to his marriage reception. The rarest flowers and choicest plants had been squandered; baskets of nosegays to be presented by children, dressed in Russian costumes, awaited the arrival of ladies. Two great torch-lights blazed upon the steps, lighting the whole front of the building. A light breath of wind at moments twisted and separated their flames, which met again, and floated away with some smoke.

"Bless me! how fine it is! He has spared nothing," said Charamirof, descending from his carriage. "He wants every one to know how happy he is."

His wife did not answer. With pinched lips she looked around her, searching for something to criticise.

"Do you find the house poorly furnished?" said Néoutof, who was watching her with a smile, that

she might have distrusted. "It is a simple hireling, which really leaves much to be desired. But I hope to offer my wife, this winter, a nest more worthy of her."

"Whatever the house may be, you have made it a delightful place," replied a friend. "The flowers and lights lend such brilliancy."

The old traditional champagne wine was passed round upon great trays of massive silver and gold workmanship.

Néoutof had gone to his wife to receive the customary greetings. He took a crystal glass cut in facets, and raised it to the height of his head. All the other glasses were directed towards his.

"I accept your congratulations, gentlemen and ladies," he said, in a strong voice. "The countess and I, we thank you; have no fear, our happiness is certain."

A murmur of feliciticions responded to this singular sally. The general emptied his glass at a draught, and threw it against the marble chimney, against which he was leaning.

"The broken glass brings good fortune," said he. "I invite you all to my silver wedding."

There was a smile at this jest. Twenty-five years was a long lease, for a man of his age; but no one dared to laugh.

The veteran of 1812 had an air so noble that none but courteous joking would have been attempted in his presence. At this moment an excellent orchestra, hidden in the garden, began a minuet

from Mozart, and the music continued through all the hours of the evening.

A supper prepared for two hundred persons retained the guests until midnight. The custom is in similar cases to retire at the end of a quarter of an hour; but the general had invited his guests to stay, and they remained out of curiosity. This wedding resembled so little one that had ever before been seen! The candles were consumed in their sockets; flowers had wilted and drooped in the heat, when the company left the house at the sound of Mendelssohn's Grand Nuptial March.

The last guests, turning about, could have seen through the large, open doors the general bowing with ceremony before his wife, taking leave of her.

"I hope," he said, "that this evening of joyous events will leave the same remembrance with you as it does with me. The festival was for you, madame, and nothing is grand or beautiful enough to be offered you. Excuse the mistakes of the author, as the Spanish say, and believe you have in me a faithful friend and devoted servant."

He had conducted her to the door of the room destined for her. At the threshold he left her, and alone she entered her apartment.

Scarcely had she reached the middle of this vast room when a chambermaid hastened in.

"His Excellency sends to know if a little more music would not be agreeable to the countess?"

"Yes, certainly!" replied Cleopatra.

The maids relieved the bride of her heavy attire.

Soon she was alone, dressed in a garment of white silk, light and rustling, trimmed with deep lace, old and yellow. The lamp of the images burned in the corner near the open bed. Cleopatra put out the candles, and took a seat near the window.

The waning quarter of the moon was disappearing behind the lindens in the park, which outlined a great mass of black, very imposing.

The night was fresh, and the heliotrope and mignonette filled the garden with a light perfume.

The violins continued to play from Mozart, but more feebly, as if they were softly preparing the ear for silence. A faint light flashed up from the ring that Cleopatra wore on her left hand. It was a large diamond, presented to her by her husband. A gold ring shone on her right hand.

"I am married," she said to herself. "It seems like a fairy story; and yet it is reality — married!"

She sighed profoundly, and leaned upon her hand her head, still heavy with the diamonds that she had worn all the evening. She had won what she had sought, — a sumptuous mansion, a situation to be envied. The conduct of the general had cut short all malicious comments. In the future she would be considered and respected as was her right to be. On a sudden the warning words of the empress shot through her memory. "Danger?" thought Cleopatra. "What danger? Danger exists for those that are ignorant. I am acquainted

with the world — For coquettes (she smiled disdainfully) — No danger can await me!" These lines from Victor Hugo came to her mind: —

> "Ta perle n'est pas dans notre onde,
> Ton sentier n'est point sous nos pas."

Sudden tears started to the eyes of the young wife. No; her pearl was not in vulgar seas. She had placed her ideal so high that every other hope would be a failure, and Cleopatra could not suffer the idea of a fall, even if it was purely intellectual.

"It is a dream to be realized," she said, when her tears ceased to flow, which was not long. "To walk upright in the pride of my sacred maidenhood; above all others, because I shall have what no others can have; so respectable that homage cannot fail being given me; so inaccessible that all will aspire to attain to me; so beautiful that no one can ever compare with me."

She needed not to look at herself in the mirror to know how beautiful she was; she knew already.

The moon had sunk behind the lindens; the violins had ceased so slowly and softly that she had not perceived it; only the perfumes were alive, and seemed more penetrating, since they alone reigned. The window remained open, and Cleopatra threw herself upon her bed, where she slept so lightly that reality still floated before her.

It was thus that she entered into her new married life.

CHAPTER XIII.

KAMOUTZINE SETTLES HIS ACCOUNTS.

"SHE is a wonder this Countess Néoutof. Not the least little intrigue, not a shade of coquetry! And her husband who seems to laugh at everybody!"

He who spoke had good reason for complaining. Three months before, he had been the very same day dismissed by Cleopatra, and jeered at by the general since. He had watched the countess, as if he had been paid for it by a police agency; but he had learned nothing, as is explained by himself in the exclamation above.

In fact, one could only speak well of Cleopatra. Married for more than four years, she had placed her house upon an exceptional footing. To enter there, one must have passed a sort of novitiate in the most refined salons of St. Petersburg; so that among the best houses the house of Néoutof was the very best, — "*la crême des crême*," said Kamoutzine, for whom metaphors cost nothing.

The behavior of the countess had been exemplary to such a degree that the empress could not refuse to name her Lady of the Palace; that which had recently been done.

It was an open acknowledgment that the mar-

riage which at first had been considered inappropriate had turned out for the best.

Thus the young wife found herself in possession of the most brilliant position that could be dreamed of, either at court or in the city.

As for the general, he had grown ten years younger; and he paraded his quaint person up and down the parlors, using his cane as a switch.

"If I live to be eighty," he said, laughing, "I shall never be older than fifty."

He was happy. Cleopatra's presence had cleared the house of a swarm of busy meddlers, parasites, and beggars, who had harassed him night and day; and whom he had not the heart to turn away, for fear they were some old companions in the army, or in some way akin to him. Cleopatra was not compelled to use force to banish this herd; the sight of this haughty, elegant lady was enough to put them to flight.

She knew how to supply the place of this crowd of interested visitors by a varied conversation; she read with care the journals and foreign reviews, in order that she might extract all matter of special importance, and relate it to her husband, who was charmed, as if he was listening to the contents of a first-rate book.

These interviews, which occupied at least two hours each day, and which were often prolonged during the breakfast, had awakened a friendship in the hearts of both which was truly extraordinary; which with the husband was not alone a fatherly

sentiment, or with the young wife an emotion of gratitude.

In spite of the great difference in their ages they appreciated each other; and this mutual esteem, this absolute confidence, had been born of this relation.

Beautiful and charming as she was, Cleopatra was not worldly; that is to say, she was willing to renounce any evening's pleasure, and remain at home, if the general was fatigued, or too indolent to go out. Among all her qualities it was this, perhaps, which had touched the old man the most deeply. He would have been scrupulous about hindering her to amuse herself as she fancied; he was happy and grateful to see that she could dispense with flatteries and triumphs.

At the end of six months of wedded life they knew each other so well that there were no longer any secrets between them, in the present at least: for neither made any allusion to their life before marriage, except as it related to affairs that were indispensable. The general, who slept very little, had the habit of asking Cleopatra, when she returned, to relate to him the adventures of the day. She did not omit a single compliment or declaration, and Heaven knows they were never wanting to her at evening balls. She excelled so well in imitating the look and tone of her admirers, that Néoutof, laughing till the tears ran down his cheeks, recognized them by the very description. She, too, laughed sometimes, but not often; it seemed as

if she wished only to amuse her husband. The mirth of others did not seem to communicate itself to her, even when she was the cause of it.

It was thus that the four years had rolled away, rejuvenating the general.

The grand duke still continued to act as a friend, but his visits became more and more rare. In spite of themselves, unknown to themselves, perhaps, meetings were no longer agreeable.

Besides, Boris, on two different occasions, had passed several months in foreign lands, which led people to think that he had taken a fancy to travelling, and would be often abroad. It was about this time that the Prince and Princess Charamirof had the great joy to be blessed with an heir. It was high time, for the pretty little figure commenced to be bony and pointed; but maternity brought plumpness to this spare body, and gave her a motherly air, which was like a second florescence.

This infant, in the expert little hands of the princess, was an instrument sent by Providence for the express purpose of tormenting her sister.

"Poor Cleopatra! Always to be childless," she would sigh with compassion, on every occasion that presented itself for exhibiting her baby to some young wife competent in maternal cares.

"But she is very happy," they would say; "and then she is so young — there will be plenty of time for her to marry again."

Irene shook her head and raised her eyes to the sky.

"Oh! don't you see! My brother-in-law has a constitution of iron; it is very possible that he will outlive his wife. No, no. She will regret, some day, having trifled away the gifts that God has showered upon her. Will you believe it? She was obstinate to a degree that is incredible. She can't complain, however, that she was not warned. It is strange. I had not the slightest suspicion that she ever was greedy; no one could have been more surprised than I was."

One can easily imagine the varied embellishments that this charitable person gave this theme; but Cleopatra no longer concerned herself with what people said of her, and she knew very well what she might expect from the affection of her sister.

It was Kamoutzine who, most often, narrated these or similar discourses to Cleopatra. He took malicious pleasure in telling her anything that might trouble or irritate her. She left him, knowing that to show she was annoyed would be to give him advantage over her.

A strange, aggressive confidence had succeeded, since her marriage, to their early alliance. They knew that they would not betray each other, but when the one could annoy or lightly wound the other they rarely abstained from this mischievous pleasure. Kamoutzine could never forgive Cleopatra for having abandoned a game that he considered so fine.

Cleopatra bore him some ill-will; she thought

that he had not furthered her cause enough, or, perhaps, for want of tact, had blasted it. They did not realize that, having never spoken together upon the subject, — at the most having only guessed it, — they had nothing for which to reproach each other. Pride which had kept them safe from any complicity, ought to teach them better now ; but it was not the case, and, without being enemies, they were no longer particular friends.

And yet Cleopatra had that sway over him which is retained by every woman who has been loved and has been inaccessible, if the man who has loved her possesses the slightest delicacy of feeling. Kamoutzine could never behold her, resplendent in diamonds and beauty without remembering the day when he visited her in her own home, — that poor, naked apartment, — and offered her his hand and the aid of his intelligence. He had loved her with his head rather than his heart, it is true ; but, nevertheless, he had loved her ; and more than once, beneath his mask of a buffoon, he had felt his heart leap when she passed near to him. Now, at certain moments, he almost hated her and still esteemed her all the same. In general Kamoutzine was dissatisfied with life and men. Suddenly the report was circulated that he had taken to drink.

He had always been a jolly companion, and two bottles of champagne in his head only had the effect of making him a little jollier. The news, therefore, did not find much support.

"The devil!" said Charamirof. "When one can carry so much wine he don't get drunk."

Yet Kamoutzine had been met several times when his eyes were swollen and his clothes in a very neglected condition.

This last was serious evidence. The irreproachable dress of this man was, perhaps, what had saved him from disgrace in more instances than one. If he neglected his person some hidden spring must have given way within him.

This was only too true. The secret strength which for so long had upheld this borrowed gayety and provoked his pasquinades was suddenly wanting to him. The grand duke had refused to pay his debts; he had refused him absolutely, with reasons therefor, as a man refuses when he is decided not to yield.

"I had promised myself," said Kamoutzine's patron, "to pay your debts seven times; I have paid them last year for the eighth time. If you have any memory you will remember what I have said then: Don't try it again."

"It is true, your Imperial Highness," murmured Kamoutzine, humbly; "but you had said the same thing the time before, and still you paid."

Formerly this repartee would have stirred Boris, but to-day he remained unmoved. This play interested him no longer; he knew it too well, and Kamoutzine had always been for him only a source of amusement. He had taken pleasure in his jokes, just as one stops to see two kittens frolic.

Their infantile grace and comical tricks would make even grave men smile. But the kittens having become cats lose their admirers; and after having been hunted from gutter to gutter they often end with a miserable death. Kamoutzine had passed the days of his frolics; perhaps also his master had become more fastidious. In short Boris was inflexible.

The principal thing for Kamoutzine to do now was to hide this disaster from his creditors. He obtained time, for they knew he was clever at negotiating what he called "loans." But little by little they became anxious at seeing him getting threadbare. His tailor had refused to dress him longer upon credit; it was to punish him for having forgotten him in his last distribution. According to the universal custom of those who live at the expense of others, the young man never pretended to make a full payment of his debts with the money that he received from his protector. He paid instalments — the smallest possible — and amused himself with the rest of his cash.

It was thus that he was seen growing anxious; the pocket-books of his friends were no longer open to him.

With the exception of Charamirof, — too good a fellow to keep any spite, and, besides, he had been often spared his terrible tongue, — Kamoutzine had no friends. He had mocked or wounded the feelings of every one. He was feared, but at heart people were glad to see him in trouble.

This anxiety could not last long; the grand duke had started for Nice at the end of December, leaving his aid-de-camp at St. Petersburg. It was a complete disgrace, and Kamoutzine knew well the day he had merited it, — when he presented himself at his service with too strong a fragrance of kummel about him.

He sank into the most profound despair. This being, who had only lived upon the surface, — to such a degree that he could almost count the times in his life when he had called himself to judgment, — this buffoon, this covert fool, descended to the bottom of his soul, and fled away awed by what he found there.

Still it was imperative to face the situation. Like a shipwrecked man, who measures with his eye the distance from the sinking ship to the nearest shore, he looked around as well as within. Nowhere did he find any help. The demands of his creditors became insolent. The report of his disgrace had spread, and the departure of the duke made matters still worse. The position was no longer supportable in a city where the least thing is at once known in the circle of people where the matter is of interest.

But what could he do?

Kamoutzine hesitated a day or two. He might resign his appointment, enter the army, and live upon his pay in some garrison in the country. The sale of a poor little estate, mortgaged, which still belonged to him, would allow him to pay about half

of his debts; the rest — the rest might go to the devil! But it was so hard, so uninviting, after having passed his life at court. This change of existence appeared to him more cruel than death. He could smell in advance the bad air of the barracks, where he would jostle against his men, and taste the German cooking, that for fifty copecks would bring him a greasy soldier. He had the impression that old age would come fast to his tired, heavy body. He knew, too, that he would be hated everywhere on account of his imagination, fruitful in the exercise of malicious, and sometimes cruel, tricks.

"No," he said, "I should be killed in a duel by some sensitive fool! — that would be too stupid!"

One evening he presented himself at the house of Néoutof, impelled by a vague desire to see Cleopatra. He had several glasses of brandy in his head, which made him more daring than usual. The count and countess had gone out.

"Too bad," said Kamoutzine, in a half whisper; "she might have given me some good counsel."

The servants regarded him, astonished to see him stay after they had refused him admission.

"Well," he said aloud, "tell them that I came; yes, I had something to say to them."

"To-morrow morning," suggested the porter, wishing he would leave.

"To-morrow morning will be too late," replied the aid-de-camp, looking at him angrily.

He went down the fine steps, and continued

his way towards his lodgings. These were two plainly furnished chambers in a street that was far from elegant. Formerly he had inhabited the Morskaïa, but since his downfall he had been constrained to take less expensive lodgings; and now he owed more than a month's rent to his hostess, who persecuted him about it from morning till night.

He entered, and went up three flights. The door was not closed, and he walked in without having been seen. The chamber was small, and smelt of the confined air; but a pleasant warmth pervaded it. He lighted the kerosene lamp placed upon the table, and dropped into an arm-chair, without having taken the pains to remove his sword-belt, which he had unhooked. The sabre fell heavily down by his side, without awakening his attention.

"It is too bad," he repeated mechanically; "she might have given me something — perhaps good advice; she has never given me anything."

Overtaken by the heat he bent forward, and fell asleep, his head resting upon his arms.

He slept thus for a long time. The clocks rung out the matins at the Kazan church, near by, which waked him with a start. The lamp had burned low, and the room was filled with a greasy, smoky odor. He had been here more than a month, but he could not accustom himself to such miserable apartments, poorly furnished, saturated with the smells of ancient dinners and ancient pipes.

"Ah," he said, coming to himself, "those hideous barracks!"

He went to the window and opened the casement, to let in a little pure air. The night was dark and cold. One could feel snow in the low, heavy clouds, that the reflection of the gas tinted with a dull, gloomy red. Kamoutzine remained for a moment, his face to the window. Nothing as yet announced the approach of day; it was half-past four; the clocks had ceased to ring; the other bells died away little by little, and silence reigned over the city, still asleep. A light fall of snow covered the sidewalks and intercepted all noise.

He closed the casement, and returned to the table. His mind was perfectly lucid at present, and life appeared to him with all that disheartening clearness that is apt to accompany sad thoughts in the night. He recalled his reply to the porter at Néoutof's: "To-morrow morning it will be too late."

"It was true," he said to himself, "for the hour has come."

He laid his watch upon the table, a portemonnaie nearly empty beside it, and a cigar-case carved in silver. It was the first present ever received from the grand duke, and from which he had never been separated. Then he went to a chest of drawers, and took out some white linen, in which he robed himself from head to foot, after having performed extensive ablutions.

"Wouldn't they say I am going to get married!" he said, ironically.

When he was fully dressed he seated himself at the table in the arm-chair, where he had passed the night, and looked at his watch; it was half-past five.

"Bah!" said he, "I can wait another half hour. It would not be polite to wake up these brave fellow-lodgers."

He took a pen and occupied himself in writing carefully the following phrase: —

"Go, bring Prince Charamirof!" then followed the address.

He put points over the i's, and added some ornaments to the capitals. Then he contemplated his work with satisfaction, and pushed it along under the fading light of the lamp.

A stroke from the clock was heard without.

"Six o'clock!" said Kamoutzine; "the moment has come. Good-night!"

His revolver was within reach of his hand; he placed it against his right temple; the shot was fired, and Kamoutzine fell back in his chair, his hand loosening from the weapon.

Confused screams resounded through the house, then the noise of rapid steps. The door was opened, and the hostess entered, scared.

"I have a ball in my head," said Kamoutzine, regarding her with one eye, for the other was closed; "I missed it. I never succeeded in anything in my life."

He made a sign for the paper; the good woman seized it. The doctor was called, and they ran for Charamirof.

The prince arrived without loss of time, bewildered, and almost angry, that his friend had committed suicide without warning him of it.

"This excellent man," said Kamoutzine, signifying the physician, "would persuade me that I shall live till evening. Indeed, I hope I shall not. I suffer atrociously. If you love me, go and bring your sister-in-law."

"Cleopatra!" cried the prince, bewildered.

"Yes, the fair Cleopatra. Hurry! I hope that her husband will not be jealous."

He spoke with ease, but his face was terribly convulsed.

Charamirof set out immediately. Less than an hour afterwards he brought the countess.

Wrapped in her furs, with a pale face she approached the bed, where, in spite of his protestations, they had placed the wounded man. The gray morning light entered through the dim windows; the chamber had a rueful aspect, though everything was in order.

"Countess," said Kamoutzine, "you need not go. Charamirof, it is no secret; countess, I believe I have loved you better than any one else has loved you in the world — yes, better than he (he winked his one remaining eye, to indicate the grand duke, that was absent). At this hour I am happy that you know it. You see I have but two pleasant remembrances in my life: you and the little seal, — do you remember the seal?"

She bowed her head, unable to speak.

"Poor thing! it was thirsty! If you could only have seen it kick about in that fresh water! I am happy now that I gave it a drink."

"That fresh water will be set to your account up yonder," said Charamirof, wiping his eyes.

"Indeed! I told you so!" rejoined Kamoutzine. "It does not offend you, madame, that I associate you with the little seal?"

Cleopatra shook her head, smiling sadly.

"The two disinterested loves of my life. Go, now, countess, don't stay here; I feel that I am really becoming too ugly."

She bent over him to say farewell. He took her hand and kissed it, as one kisses the feet of Christ. She left without turning around.

"Come, doctor," said Kamoutzine, with impatience, "you are not going to let me suffer like this till night? Give me something to finish me. You, a doctor, you ought to know how to get rid of your patients!"

The doctor could do nothing; but death was merciful, and he passed away about two o'clock in the afternoon.

Charamirof had him buried at his own expense, and paid all the little bills of those that had tended him.

"At last," sighed Irene, as her husband was chief mourner, "he is dead; it was high time. Since the scene with the seal I have had a decided horror of him."

CHAPTER XIV.

EASTER NIGHT.

AFTER a cold, dreary winter, in which the sun had scarcely been seen ten times, Easter eve came round amidst all the splendors of spring-time. The whole week had been soft and mild; the snow had melted rapidly in the warm rain, which made one dream of fresh leaves. Within twenty-four hours the yellow strands of grass began to grow green, between the paving-stones. The sun set on Saturday evening in a vast, vaporous sea of gilded clouds, beneath which the still solid ice of the Néva seemed an anachronism. When the weather is good on Easter eve the whole of St. Petersburg is alive with gladness and joy. One sees at this epoch the streets full of spry little laundry girls, running in every direction, with dainty white muslin skirts flying from the tops of poles that support them. It is the custom that all the young girls and women who attend church at midnight be dressed in white, — in those early times muslin was required, — and any passer-by, the most busy even, would have known what fête was in preparation by these great butterflies that flap their wings about his head, sometimes enveloping him, if he was not on the alert, in a cloud of fine, starched muslin.

Cleopatra left home in her coupé, furnished with a warming-bottle, covered with furs, to repair to the chapel in the Winter Palace for the midnight service, to which her new and dignified office called her. For this solemn occasion the young wife wore a dress splendid, but unadorned, which enhanced greatly her beauty. The general, retained in bed by an attack of gout, had contemplated her a long time before allowing her to leave him. Now she rolled along speedily behind her two fine horses, across the illuminated city which was already gay with the tolling of bells. Equipages met from all directions as if it had been midday. Peasants, dressed in their *touloupes* of lamb-skins, pressed about the thresholds of the churches, which were surrounded with tables loaded with Easter pressed milk and koulitchi, — cakes with dried raisins, — brought there to be blessed, and great baskets of red eggs.

Everything was so gay, so lively, that Cleopatra lowered the window of her carriage to enjoy this truly exquisite night. Something brave and youthful, like the crowing of a cock, filled all the air. These noises were confused in the distance, and sometimes one could imagine the sounds of music and the shouts of joy, as at the triumphal entrance of the victorious tsar. An eternal dawn seemed to be playing around the horizon, throwing a mysterious splendor over all.

"What a strange night!" thought the young wife; "one would say it was morning."

Suddenly she recalled the evening of her marriage, the sleepy violins dying away in the gardens, with the penetrating perfume of the August flowers, and the moon waning behind the lindens.

"I was entering night then," she said; "to-night it seems as if I was entering day."

The carriage stopped before the well-known perron, and she mounted lightly the steps that she had so often trod before, when she was maid-of-honor. Nothing had changed, and for the moment she was transported far into the past; but the place she took in the chapel was not the same as in those times; a quick glance showed her that many changes had been made since she had resigned her previous functions.

Indeed, she had never attended this Easter mass since her marriage; although punctual to court receptions. She had never demanded any favor, contenting herself with accepting and fulfilling the duties incumbent upon her rank. Her recent functions as Lady of the Palace had not yet led her into this chapel, where everything spoke to her of times gone by. Involuntarily she turned her head in the direction of the seat formerly occupied by Boris. He was at Nice, at this same hour, ready to assist at the same ceremony. Cleopatra felt her heart soften within her.

Ah! if he had ever believed that she would deny the attraction that had drawn her to him, he had not known her, and misjudged her. If he had thought she would some day laugh that he had re-

spected her, when he might have treated her as a flower which is gathered and then cast aside after the perfume and sweetness are extracted, he had abused her.

But she pardoned him in this sacred night of appeasement and joy, this Easter time of reconciliation. He had placed God between her and him. She confided him to the all-powerful hands of her Creator, praying him to guard this dear being, worthy to be happy, worthy to be loved.

The court entered, the emperor conducting the empress, with all his beautiful imperial family following; each one was in place, the pages carrying the trains, with such luxury of diamonds, velvets, and laces as would never be seen in any other place. Scarcely were the sovereigns standing at their appointed places when the door of carved and gilded wood that shuts the iconostase opened, and the priests went out, with hymns, to seek the Christ, who had just been resurrected, and whose body they were not able to find. With crosses and banners, leading beneath the blinding glare of chandeliers which threw out floods of light, the clergy, accompanied by singers, went out at the left, to seek the divine body. The chants grew fainter in the distance of the vast halls; now broke in the sharp voices of the children; then nothing more. A religious silence reigned throughout the chapel, where not even the breathing of the three hundred persons there assembled was audible. Men were on one side, and women on the other. Silence

was so great that the petals of a camelia that escaped from the dress of a lady were heard to fall on the floor.

Aerial voices resounded in the distance; then tenor voices which approached; then the base; and the clergy, marching so rapidly that they almost ran, entered at the right after having made the tour of the palace. The chants stopped suddenly.

"Christ is arisen!" spoke the priest, with a voice so strong that it seemed to pierce the very soul of his hearers.

"He is truly arisen!" responded the singers and the crowd.

Three times the priest repeated the sacred words, and received the same response. A song of joy burst forth beneath the vaulted roof, like fireworks, and all exchanged the kiss of peace, while the holy mass began behind the closed crimson silk curtains of the sanctuary.

Cleopatra had assisted many times at this ceremony, and nothing was new to her; yet she had never been so impressed before. After having exchanged a few words with her neighbors, during the interval of felicitations and embracings, she looked around her to examine the new faces.

By chance she was in the middle of the chapel, near the passage, so that in her row she was not far from the men. While her eyes passed over the groups she received several ardent greetings, which she returned with that amiable politeness

that is so becoming between people at a distance. Suddenly her attention was fixed upon a stranger that she had never seen there before.

He was leaning lightly against a marble column; his astonished eyes seemed to contemplate wonderful objects, for they wandered at hazard without knowing where to rest. He was a man of twenty-five or twenty-six years, but who appeared still younger on account of his blonde hair and fresh carnation. His mustache was blonde also, but of silvery gold; the regularity of his features was of faultless purity, — so beautiful and perfect that one would not remark at the first glance how exquisite and tasteful was all his being. "What a beautiful man!" thought Cleopatra, involuntarily. She loved beauty everywhere, in life as in museums.

The young man turned slowly from one lady to another in that group where wealth could not conquer beauty. Suddenly Cleopatra encountered his eyes. They were jet-black, and shone like carbuncles beneath the brown lashes, delicately arched. As he perceived the countess his magnificent eyes were fixed with such an expression of admiration and surprise that all decorum was forgotten. "I have never seen a woman that could compare with you," said these black eyes, accompanied with respect so deep that admiration was only an involuntary homage.

"What magnificent eyes!" thought Cleopatra; "and what an intense look!"

They ceased to look at each other, recalled by reflection to rules of politeness; but each had penetrated the other deeper, and formed a more intimate acquaintance than often transpires in years of material existence.

Again their eyes met. It was in vain that they turned away; a hidden magnet drew them together.

Easter services are very long; commencing at midnight, they do not terminate until nearly two o'clock in the morning. But it did not seem to be wearisome to the Countess Néoutof. She felt that something had entered into her life. What could it be? She knew not, and did not wish to think about it.

When at last all had ended, and, wrapped in furs, she waited under the péristyle till her carriage was announced, she saw the Swedish embassador approaching her, followed by the young man whom she had noticed. The embassador was a friend, and held in high esteem by Cleopatra.

"The place is badly chosen, countess," said the diplomat, "and the hour is no better; but I leave to-morrow for a vacation, and it would be a crime not to recommend to your watchful care my young cousin, Ulric d'Alsen."

Ulric bowed gravely.

"He only arrived two days ago, and now is going to be left alone to get what information he can during my absence. You have always been extremely good to me; if I dared — I would pray

you to consider my cousin as if he was my son."

"That will suffice, dear baron, for him to be welcome at our house."

The carriage approached; she greeted them with a gesture of the head, glided between the two crystal doors and disappeared.

"Who is that remarkable person, to whom you have introduced me?" asked Ulric d'Alsen of the embassador.

"It is the Countess Néoutof, — the most beautiful woman of the court, and the most virtuous, my young friend."

Ulric said nothing; he returned home without having opened his lips; but all night he saw in his dreams the blue eyes of Cleopatra fixed upon him with that interest that denied all dissimulation.

CHAPTER XV.

"I ADORE YOU."

"I ADORE you," said the black eyes. The mouth remained closed, but the lips had a fashion of smiling which spoke more than words. "I adore you; you are the only woman in the world! The rest have never existed — do not exist — will never exist!"

Thus the black eyes talked for fifteen days, from the first hour of the visit that d'Alsen had made to the Countess Néoutof. The laws of society allowed him ten minutes' sojourn in the salon, where as yet he knew no one; he remained a full hour, replying to some questions from Cleopatra in monosyllables, and looking at her as much as he could. After that a secret intuition taught him that he ought not to stay so long, and at the end of twenty minutes he generally left, though he returned almost every day.

The first day Cleopatra was amused. This simple and silent adoration was touching, and a little comical for a woman accustomed to the distilled essences of a very civilized and very corrupt world, where appearances hide reality.

But soon, ere the week had elapsed, the countess felt some new and strange emotion within her-

self. The daily visits of the young Swede had become necessary to her: she waited for him with a certain impatience, and if he did not come the day seemed empty. She would not admit it even to herself, and shrugged her shoulders, saying: —

"Am I becoming foolish and vain like the rest? Am I going to open an account with my visitors, to see if they neglect me? That would do for Irene."

Days rolled by. Spring had the appearance of having come to stay; a light, generous breeze, full of freshness, melted the crust of ice upon the Néva; the sun, in the middle of the day, shone with such brilliancy that it almost burned the naked hand. The contrast between this intense heat and the cold, bracing air brought with it a fever, — but a fever of gay restfulness, which impelled everybody to walk, talk, and laugh.

Cleopatra herself was drawn into this joyous whirlpool of spring-time, and her ordinary gravity was touched with a tint of rose. She went out a great deal, and willingly. Her husband, constrained to remain at home, was amused with her recitals, into which she threw animation and a spirit of raillery to such a degree as he had never known.

Some new fancy led her to fill her house with flowers, — April flowers, with penetrating odors and bright colors; jonquils, hyacinths, lilies of the valley were scattered here and there among the sober plants, and which made one think of the

clear notes of church-bells falling into the confusion of a busy city; these intoxicating odors penetrated everywhere, even to the remotest corners.

The great military parade was announced for the sixth of May, and, as usual, was much talked of in advance. It was the event that would close up, so to speak, the season of winter.

The evening before, Ulric d'Alsen made his appearance at his usual hour, and by chance found Cleopatra alone. It was the first time, and it caused her some uneasiness. For two or three weeks the eyes of the young man had talked a great deal; what were his lips going to speak? For a moment she was frightened. This charming creature, — might he be wanting in intelligence?

The acuteness of the regret which inspired this fear plunged the countess into a series of questions almost indiscreet. Where had Ulric been educated? Who was his family? Why was he at St. Petersburg? What did he think of the city and its inhabitants? The young man replied to everything in a satisfying manner. Up to the time when he was fifteen he had lived in the country with his mother, who had educated him almost alone, with the aid of the pastor of the church. Having then lost her, he entered a military school, at the request of his uncle, the embassador. Five years later he graduated from there with honors, when he immediately became an officer in the regiment, and within a short time had been named military attaché to the Swedish embassy.

It was all very simple, and yet, in the sound of his voice and the form of speech, one divined that the young man had loved his mother passionately ; that this military career was not in harmony with his dreamy, contemplative nature ; but, being honest and scrupulous, he fulfilled his duties conscientiously.

" Well, St. Petersburg, does it please you?" demanded Cleopatra, fixing upon him a deep look.

" I have enjoyed, since coming to this city, such emotions as I never experienced before," answered he, lowering his black eyes ; " and, come what may, I shall never forget them."

A silence followed. Cleopatra was amazed.

His words, so simple, had gone straight to her soul, for she knew too well their bearing. Suddenly she looked at the young man, and again their eyes met ; she stood bewildered, reading therein what she had never suspected.

What — was it love? This divine ecstasy, this blind submission, this supreme adoration, — the whole being going out to the object it seeks, — was this love?

She had not dreamed of it thus ; it was not thus other men loved, — men that she had met. With them love was a fight, in which the most artful won the victory ; and it was for that, that she had scorned them.

This youthful soul loved differently ; this young man whose life had been spent in work, almost in

solitude, asked for nothing, and gave all. What woman would not have been touched by it?

Cleopatra experienced a feeling of tenderness, almost of pity, for this child that gave himself to her, without any reserve of pride or vanity.

"You are very young," she said with kindness, but with no superiority or disdain.

"I am twenty-six," replied he.

The same age as she! She blushed as she thought of herself, of her acquaintance with life; her illusions, her worldly egotism. This man that had remained a child, of how much more worth than she!

"You have a grand future before you," she said, in order not to let the conversation drop.

The words came with effort; she would have preferred silence, in the soft and balmy atmosphere of the closed salon, richly furnished, full of comfort and luxury.

A delicious torpor was gaining possession of her senses; nothing had ever seemed so near to happiness as this interview, peaceful in appearance, in this delightful place.

"A career, — yes, perhaps," replied he with indifference.

Apparently he concerned himself about nothing except that which occupied him entirely; that which made his soul vibrate at the words — even words uttered in jest — of the woman he loved. Silence again, and the black eyes were fixed, not upon Cleopatra's face, — he only dared to look at

her now and then, — but upon her neck, where her collar, fastened by a brooch, exposed the dazzling skin of pearly whiteness.

Happily, General Trédine entered without being announced, as was the custom in this house, where there were no mysteries.

Ulric grew pale, and a light color mounted to the cheeks of the countess.

The new arrival brought with him a whole harvest of news, gathered here and there in different salons. After two or three minutes of conversation, in which he took no part, the young Swede retired without the new-comer having noticed him.

"You are absent, countess; you do not listen to me," he said at last, observing that Cleopatra paid no heed to his discourse.

"I beg a thousand pardons," she said, carrying her hand to her brow. "I believe I have a touch of headache."

"I will retire, then," said the intruder. "You must go out for a drive; that will do you good this beautiful weather."

"You are right," replied Cleopatra, with some vivacity, and immediately she ordered her carriage.

Twenty minutes later, rocked by the gentle springs of her great landau, she was rolling away towards the movable bridge of the palace, whose planks echoed beneath the feet of the horses like the noise of continuous thunder. The coachman knew the favorite drives of his mistress, for he

drove her through the vast, deserted, dusty streets to the islands, still abandoned, like the great solitary parks that awaited the return of their masters.

A few days more, and all the houses, drowned in foliage of living green, would open to receive their elegant and rich hosts. At present it was a lonely spectacle, — the high, pretentious façades; the walls of gray wood; the neglected gardens, where the last traces of snow had scarcely disappeared. And yet the honeysuckles already showed a few green leaves; a few lilac buds dared to break through the brown bark. It was, perhaps, winter still; to-morrow it would surely be spring-time.

And thus the carriage rolled along upon the gravel pavements of the winding alleys, bearing the countess and her thoughts, that were as undulating as the winding route. Sometimes the sun would send a fiery ray into her face, and then the equipage would pass beneath the shade of the branches, scarcely indicated, — stripped yet of leaves, but swollen with buds. The air was cool and full of life, for the arms of the Néva that surrounded the islands with a liquid net-work were still frozen, as well as the river.

The ice was so thin that one could see the water playing beneath, as the blood is seen beneath a delicate skin.

In spots it had given way, and the sun reflected a little blue lake, spangled with silver. Around the borders, a crystal fringe of long icicles, resem-

bling Bohemian chandeliers, commenced the hidden and incessant work of disaggregation.

A slight shiver of fever seemed to float above all, with the smell of dead leaves, decomposed during their long sleep beneath the snow.

Cleopatra shuddered now and then; she was suffering physical discomfort as well as moral. The intruder, that had interrupted her conversation with Ulric, was a messenger sent by fate, but badly received, as are all messengers of that order; he had brought warning to the countess, stupefied in a sweet drowsiness.

"Why did he come?" she said to herself, with regret. "We were having such a pleasant conversation."

And something within her said: —

"It is well, indeed, that he came; for without that"—

The thought was not completed; the idle languor of the spring days prevented her to formulate, or more likely she did not wish to explain to herself exactly what she felt.

The two good trotters were speeding along at the same rapid and cadenced pace. Cleopatra saw that she was passing the palace of the grand duke, and an impulse of curiosity prompted her to turn her head towards this princely residence that she had never before remarked. Probably the master was still absent, for his return had not as yet been announced.

In the alley that leads to the palace, near her, with

his back turned towards the road, was a man walking; she recognized, without difficulty, the proud and noble carriage. At the sound of the passing team he turned, and during the tenth-part of a second Cleopatra was allowed to observe his face.

It was he, Boris, that she had once loved, or that she had believed she loved.

"How old he has grown!" she thought, surprised with her discovery.

With the quickness of perception that comes to a drowning man she rapidly reviewed the days gone by, and perceived that a gulf had been ploughed between her and the past, — a gulf so deep that the past itself had been sunk within it; like cliffs undermined by the ocean.

"Is it possible that I loved him?" she said, as astonished as a child that sees a plaything break in its hand, — "I loved him, this tired, worn man?"

Cleopatra was not one of those who trifle with truth, and who deny evidence to justify their caprices; she plunged sincerely into her conscience.

She had loved Boris — how? With her brains. Now the dream was finished. She felt pity for the sentimental young girl who had held such fancies.

"I was young then," she said to herself, "and did not know life. I do not know what breath of madness blew upon me. My first conception of existence was to make a pedestal of the frailty of others and to attain to the highest summit. I wanted to be grand duchess; who knows? I might have been, if it had not been for my ridiculous senti-

mental notions. Well, I have nothing to regret; I have that which I wished: rank, fortune, consideration. What can I ask for more?"

She had closed her eyes to be able better to look within her soul; suddenly an image rose before her. The black eyes of Ulric were looking into hers, penetrating as a philter. "Ah!" thought she, feeling herself giving way, and, so to speak, melting into a sweet swoon, "I don't know what it is — the spring, without doubt — which unnerves and exhausts me. Return home!" she said to the coachman. A few moments later the thunder of the horses' shoes were heard upon the bridge of boats.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GRAND PARADE.

IT was cold, for the Néva, though free of ice for a month, had been suddenly covered with great icicles that had come down from Lake Ladoga in the night; but the troops did not complain.

Forty thousand armed men were drawn up in groups on the Place du Champ de Mars with that military precision that did great credit to their chief. It would have been impossible to use better that place, which is neither vast nor regular, the Champ de Mars being somewhat in the form of a trapezium.

Arms and horses of incomparable beauty glittered in the sun, which burned them without mercy. Some covered tribunes constructed along the canal that borders the Summer Garden afforded shade for the court and the diplomaticy. Numerous seats were filled with distinguished guests. All around the place a vast crowd of people, separated from the troops by a simple cord fastened to posts, watched patiently. They had been standing since the earliest hour of the morning, noiseless and motionless, without acting any buffoonery that with us would have been introduced as amusement during this long waiting.

All the balconies of the houses and palaces surrounding the place were covered with ladies in light dresses and gay parasols. All were in a mood of honest gayety, — a little pompous, however, — court gayety one might say. This display, with flags and banners, floated over the scene.

The clocks struck twelve; two or three open carriages, conveying the imperial princesses, crossed the open space, and ranged themselves near the tribunes. Then the emperor appeared, escorted by his staff officers, riding a magnificent steed, that champed his bit covered with foam.

Cheers rose from all breasts when the flags were lowered before him. As he rode past the front of the lines, displayed in several parallel ranks, followed by the carriage containing the empress, he saluted the troops, who answered to his greeting with as much harmony of voice as if the shout had come from the lips of one man. The music struck up the national hymn, and the flourish of trumpets in the distance gave the signal for the troops to prepare to march.

From all this commotion, these standards fringed with gold and stained with blood, from these men who loved their sovereign as they did their God, there rose to the blue sky shouts of joy, shouts of enthusiasm and of triumph that fail description. It was the Russian army that cheered their chief, and when, in his last review, the emperor saluted the people, it was the whole of Russia that responded with one universal welcome.

This people love instinctively and deeply the one that they place above mortals.

As the emperor returned to the front of the tribunes the march began. It is the traditional custom for the troops to start off at full speed. Now the place for their starting is as parsimoniously measured out as the place for their halting. It is here that are accomplished every year wonderful equestrian feats, not only by the officers, but by the simple soldiers as well, who must be perfect in their horsemanship.

It is a wonderful spectacle. At the sound of clarions that sound the charge this heavy mass is set in motion, and passes like a hurricane amid savage cries, neighing of horses, clashing of arms; and a hundred yards farther on, the squadron resumes again its slow trot, and continues its way to the barracks. Everywhere, this manœuvre would be dangerous; in this restricted place it is prodigious.

Elated by the cries, the flourish of trumpets, and also by the peculiar sentiment that accompanies these great military fêtes, Cleopatra looked on with sparkling eyes; a little weary, also, but happy.

Ulric d'Alsen was near by, mounted on a white horse, which he found difficult to control, and that prevented him from looking at his idol as often as he would have wished. Cleopatra did not wish him to look oftener; she liked to cast her eyes upon him, without his knowing it. He was

handsome in his strict uniform; and every woman had the same opinion.

Behind her she heard more than one remark about the young military officer; her self-love smiled within her, and fluttered softly. There are very few things that flatter the vanity of women more than this assurance, namely, to be loved by a man that all other women are seeking to monopolize. It is an inferior order of enjoyment, most assuredly; but it calls a smile of satisfaction to the lips, and this smile played over the features of Cleopatra.

The artillery terminated the march with loud clanging and rattling. The staff officers, grouped around their sovereign, received the commendation that they merited. The Grand Duke Boris, riding his sorrel with perfect grace, approached Cleopatra, who occupied a seat in the corner of the tribune, — a place universally envied, because it allowed conversation with all that passed.

"Good-morning, countess," he said. "What a superb fête!"

"Truly superb, my lord," replied she.

The same voice, but the echo was dead. There was no tremor on her lips at the sound of this voice that had once been so dear.

"More beautiful than ever!" he said, with that careless gallantry that permitted of little or much importance being attached to his words, according to the will of the person.

She smiled with an expression slightly indicative

of modest triumph, and her eye wandered towards Ulric, who dared not come nearer, but who had grown pale, and was biting his mustache.

Boris followed the look, and his became suddenly fixed.

"To say you look younger would be an affront," he replied; "but I seem to see in you to-day something more juvenile, more aerial, than I have ever remarked since" — he glanced about him, and, turning his horse, perhaps intentionally excited, — "since your marriage," he concluded.

Cleopatra reddened (something that did not happen often with her). But the grand duke had not forgotten how this marble beauty grew charming beneath a fugitive blush.

"Your Imperial Highness is very kind to recall the past, — so far in the past," she said.

"The heart knows no age," replied Boris, making his horse whirl about. It had become decidedly nervous. "And my excellent friend Néoutof? — absent? — gout?"

"Precisely, my lord!"

The eyes of Ulric flashed. What would he not have given to know what was passing between these two persons, — the one so gallant, the other so visibly flattered!

"Remember me to him, I pray you," concluded Boris, with a nod.

Immediately he held a word or two of conversation with an old maid-of-honor, who became purple with joy at the recognition.

Ulric had drawn near. If he had dared to utter all he had in his heart, what a questioning the countess would have had to submit to! His eyes spoke volumes. They were cruel reproaches, though silent, about the coquetry that made him suffer. They were menaces, — menaces of a desperate person, who would die if he saw himself replaced by a rival.

"Child!" said Cleopatra's eyes.

A giddiness mounted to her brain; the sun, the music, the fête, — everything had intoxicated her. The ambiguous words of the grand duke, perhaps, coming back to her after so many years; everything seemed leagued together to dazzle her.

A cannon resounded from the fortress, the other side of the Néva.

"The waters are rising," said a voice. "Is the ice going out?"

Cleopatra felt her heart beat, though she scarcely knew why.

The review had ended, and while every one was hurrying to regain their carriages she remained, one hand resting on the velvet seat of the tribune, troubled to such a point as not to know where she was.

"Countess," said the voice of Ulric, close to her, "allow me to put you into your carriage."

He had given his horse into the care of a soldier, and stood before her with uncovered head, offering her his gloved hand to descend the two or three carpeted steps.

Cleopatra followed his movement mechanically; her open landau was there, and, leaning upon the hand of the young man, she mounted.

"The Néva is going out," said voices near to them. "Come, let's go and see it."

"Come," said the countess.

Ulric entered quickly, and seated himself opposite to her.

"To the quay!" said Cleopatra.

The footman sprang up by the side of the coachman, and the carriage, following the file, came up to the quay of the Court.

Neither of them had considered. They only felt that they could not be separated at that moment without exchanging a word; amid the hubbub of carriages and words they watched the spectacle that lay before their eyes.

The ice had started in places. Some large pieces had plunged beneath the water, then risen in perpendicular forms; a part of the blue water sparkled in the sunlight; all the rest was of dazzling whiteness. Suddenly the whole width of the river was stirred by some mysterious force. An enormous icicle, three hundred yards wide and quite as long, came tearing down the stream. It was precipitated upon the mass standing; a terrible crash was heard, and hundreds of pieces rose up like tables of crystal, which immediately fell with a sound, though piercing, yet harmonious and exquisite as fairy music. Chaos appeared all along the banks of this immense river (which in this

locality was at least half a mile wide), a white, chaotic mass, fantastic where innumerable prisms, traversed by the rays of the sun, threw up rainbows of unparalleled beauty.

"How beautiful it is!" remarked Ulric.

"You have seen such sights," said Cleopatra, half-joking. "You have seen that, or better, in Sweden?"

"I don't know," he said; "nothing has ever seemed so beautiful."

His knees touched the folds of her dress; beneath the furs that covered them the same warm atmosphere enveloped their limbs. He was giving way.

"Look!" cried Cleopatra eagerly, "they have set out again."

She wished to divert his eyes, that burned her face. It seemed as if he had within his breast a fire sweet, but inexorable, which was gaining, gaining upon her.

A sharp noise, like the report of a cannon, rang through the air; the chaos crumbled away; the great icicles rolled over upon themselves, and the rapid current swept the whole mass away. There, where a moment before the icy desert was studded with transparent needles, the river had recovered its empire, and the blue waves rolled swift and free. Only a few masses of snow went dipping up and out, like swans.

Cleopatra felt that all her anterior life had passed away with these last vestiges of winter. It seemed to her that all her old love for Boris, her

devotion to Néoutof, her worldly duties, her triumphs as a woman,— all had disappeared in the blue eddying waters. One thing alone remained — a great current, deep and rapid, that was bearing her — where? Towards the sun, towards warmth.

She looked at Ulric, and for the first time: "I adore you," he said very low.

But she had heard.

She did not turn away her eyes; her lips half opened, and the word that she had not said was received by the bewildered lover.

"Return home quick," she said to the coachman. "You will take a cup of tea with me?" said she to the young man.

He must answer something.

He only replied with a gesture. With closed eyes he drank in the delights of his mysterious vision.

They rolled away with noise across the pavement. Now and then Cleopatra shuddered as if she was cold. The landau stopped before the house of Néoutof. She alighted quickly, let her pelisse fall to the ground, and ran to the bottom of the salon.

Ulric had followed her at the same rapid step. When she reached the place where she usually sat she turned towards him.

"What have you said?" she asked, trembling from head to foot.

"I adore you," repeated the young man.

Closing her eyes, she reached out to him ner

hands, which he seized and kissed, pressing them long to his lips as if he drank in their sweetness. As the kiss was prolonged the blood escaped from Cleopatra's cheeks, till she dropped down into an arm-chair.

He regarded her, — and, frightened, released the hand that he held.

"My God! how pale you are!"

Without opening her eyes she smiled fondly.

"Remain there," she said, with a feeble voice; "don't move; don't speak."

He obeyed, not daring to approach her. After a while she raised a little her languid head, and looked at him.

"I do not know," she said, "what will become of you or me; but death is delicious, if it is death, — and if it is love" —

He bent towards her.

"And if it is love, I love you," she said, in a sigh.

The footman came in with a tray of tea.

"Be seated there," said Cleopatra, with the same low voice.

He took a seat; the servant arranged the cups and went out.

"Now," she said, "tell me how you happened to love me."

CHAPTER XVII.

JEALOUSY.

AFTER an hour, which seemed to them scarcely to have lasted a minute, the young Swede retired, and Cleopatra entered her own apartment.

Under any other circumstances she would have run to her husband to relate to him the particulars of the review; but now the review seemed as far off as the one a year ago. She sought to collect her thoughts; she could recall nothing. Not that her memory refused to evoke the incidents of the fête; but the image of Ulric, and the impression of that kiss into which he had poured his life, blot at once all other impressions.

Literally she could think of nothing else.

To return to real life, Cleopatra resorted to means that almost always served her. She rung for her chamber-maid, and asked another toilet. One must have had the experience to know how the contact of other garments has the power to avert the importunity of a thought. It seemed as if she had stripped off the tunic of Nessus.

Refreshed, rested, she entered the presence of her husband, who had already sent twice for her.

"Well!" he said; "you have come at last?"

"I was cold," replied she. "The ice from

Ladoga barred up the river the moment the parade terminated; it was a great affair. Others went to see it, and so I did; and, returning, I can assure you I had need to warm myself somehow."

"True; your hands are like ice," remarked the old man, kissing the one the countess extended to him.

Instinctively Cleopatra withdrew her hand. After Ulric's lips, was it not profanity to let others approach it?

Néoutof regarded his wife with a shade of astonishment. It was the first time that such a thing had happened; ordinarily she accepted with good grace this form of commonplace homage, but he thought that probably she had been somehow affected by the cold.

"Well, my dear child," he said, sinking down comfortably into his arm-chair, "how did it come off?"

Cleopatra sought with all her energy to recall the incidents which she had been in the habit of giving an account of, but the task was beyond her power.

"Decidedly," she said, "I am very tired; question me, and I will reply."

Smiling, the general took upon himself to ask all sorts of questions; she replied, but with an absent air. While he was talking, while she named this one and that, she was looking into Ulric's eyes; she was listening to the three words with which he had taken possession of her; and the conversa-

tion that was going on seemed like angry birds of night, dismal bats that passed between her and her vision.

"And the imperial family?" asked Néoutof, completing the list.

"Oh, yes!" responded Cleopatra. "The Grand Duke Boris has returned."

"Boris?"

The scrutinizing eye of the general questioned the face of his wife. Was it the return of the grand duke that rendered her so absent? His voice had trembled a little in naming the prince; that of his wife seemed very calm; but that was no proof of indifference — women are so artful!

"Yes, he has returned; he was very agreeable."

Néoutof said nothing; all his animation and his gayety gradually vanished; he appeared very old, his jaw a little relaxed, his back bent, and his gouty hand stretched out upon the robe that covered his knees.

"How old he is!" thought Cleopatra, looking at him.

A vision came to her mind like the apparitions that in a fancy play pierce some sombre gauze.

She saw distinctly a plumed hearse, loaded with flowers; it was bearing away the count, full of years and crowned with honors, to his last resting-place. It was open day, beneath a resplendent sky, the same as had shone upon the Néva. This funeral was as bright as sunrise.

"Oh, it is horrible!" thought the countess, covering her eyes with both her hands, that still thrilled with the kisses.

A feeling of sincere pity caused her to lean over the chair of her husband.

"You seem to be suffering, my friend," she said, with tenderness.

"I am old." His voice was broken, and a little hard.

She was silent. He was seventy-seven; one is truly old at that age; but when the count was gay, he appeared so much younger that one easily forgot the number of his years. Nevertheless he could not live very long, — a few years at the most, — and what are a few years when one is loved?

To anticipate death — how horrible! Cleopatra was ashamed of herself.

"The pleasant weather that is coming will restore you, my friend," she said, kindly. He was wounded, without knowing the cause. As sensitive as a blood-hound, he felt something hostile to his happiness, and his nerves suffered. If some awkward servant had come within his grasp at that moment he would have floored him beneath the weight of his anger. Meanwhile Cleopatra was kindly watching him; she loved him sincerely,— this wise friend, who up to that moment had given her so much happiness.

"You are very kind," he said, in a tone less harsh, "but I am nervous. Please to leave me; I hope to be better before dinner."

She hesitated a moment; a secret voice told her that she was the cause of this sudden discontent. She would have liked to repair the fault that she had unintentionally committed; but this fault was so subtle, so unattainable, that she did not know how to approach it.

She bent over the aged and withered brow, crowned with a forest of thick white hair bristled up with anger, and kissed it as if she had been a daughter.

"Your suffering causes me grief, my friend," she said; "I hope you will be better in a moment."

He took the hand that rested upon the arm of the chair, and looked at it, without carrying it to his lips.

"You are my only joy, Cleopatra," said he. "I have done wrong to become so much attached to you. I ought to have considered what is more in keeping with my age, and not to have expected of you what they seek from a flower — its perfume; — but I am weak and have allowed myself to be drawn by the delight of finding you so tender, so devoted to your old friend. You must forgive me, my dear child; one can forgive much to old people, because they have not long to live. But go, my child, go; don't let yourself get sad over the senseless talk of a gouty old man; be beautiful, gay, and, above all, happy."

Resolutely Cleopatra rubbed the palm of her hand over the back of first one, and then the other; she must efface the kiss at any price. Then

she, of her own will, presented to her husband's lips the purified hand. He kissed it with gratitude, and she left his room; her head raised, but her heart singularly moved, and a little torn.

"Old fool," said Néoutof to himself, regarding the door through which she had passed; "at your age to be jealous of such a creature! And why? Because your imperial friend has spoken two words to this marvel of good sense and beauty! Don't you know better, growing old? You were less ridiculous when you married her! Were you less ridiculous, or did you simply believe you were?"

He was plunged into a retrospective dream that brought such charm to his senses, that the dinner hour found him more gay, and ready to enjoy the blessings of life, as well those of the soul as of external luxuries.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TRYING TO KEEP IN ORDER.

THE first surprise had found Cleopatra wholly unarmed. There had been so much unforeseen in the sudden birth of this passion, or rather so much unavowed in all that had preceded it, that the shock had entirely overthrown the equipoise of the countess.

Where would all this lead her? What would be the result of a love as strange as unjustifiable for a man that she scarcely knew?

She did not think about it, though her clear intelligence was forced to face the consequences, but she wished to see nothing, know nothing. She sought to come to her senses, but did not succeed; like one taken in a whirlwind, turning round and round upon the same spot, without compass — occupied by one idea alone — not to be thrown to the earth — she only wished to be let alone, to the end that she might taste the heavenly joy awakened in these first love emotions. She was caught and pinioned in this net-work of passion. Come what might she belonged to Ulric, as he belonged to her. They might never be anything to each other in reality, — but in this dream they were one. It was not the best perhaps that love offers, but it was the most irresistible.

After a strange short night, that Cleopatra had passed in a sort of half-wakeful dream, in which the scene of the landau had repeated itself, and stretched away indefinitely like the lustre of a vast salon lined with mirrors, placed vis-à-vis, she rose up from her bed; she was weary and trembling, as if she had suffered a fit of fever; hoping to return again to actual life she resorted to a bath to restore her.

She dressed rapidly, putting on a very elegant morning costume, and went to her husband.

He had slept well; his good-nature had reappeared, and the gout seemed to have left him, so that he was able to leave his chair and take several turns around his room.

Cleopatra's memory was restored with her usual brightness, and she recited every incident of the parade to her husband. Thus he was able to enjoy at his leisure all the luxury of the little scandals of the court and city, which formed his principal amusement; and the morning rolled away in a delightful manner.

After breakfast he wished to take his usual nap. Cleopatra proposed to remain, in order to be near him when he waked, in case his sleep was short, which often happened; but he refused with gallantry that which he named a sacrifice.

"No," he said, "my good and beautiful friend, return to your apartments; receive visitors, or go out to walk. Don't feel bound to consecrate yourself entirely to me, and, above all, don't allow me

to fall into the selfish habit of thinking I cannot do without you!"

She complied, and returned to the parlor; once alone she was overcome with terrible lassitude; all her mirth, all her energy, had departed. She took up some work, but threw it down impatiently; a new book suffered the same fate, for, after having read a couple of pages, she found she had not understood a word. Almost in despair, she opened the piano and played a scherzo from Chopin, in which all the struggles of her agonizing soul found vent in a fiery language.

It was just that which was necessary to her; the thrilling notes were the cries of human voices; the bursts of heavenly sound came from an inaccessible ideal; it was the exterior expression of the storm that was raging within her.

A light step was heard on the carpet of the salon, and then the clinking of spurs; she sprang up as if taken in the very act of committing some flagrant offence.

It was Ulric; he almost ran, to reach her more quickly. She was frightened — was he so soon her master? What would become of her if she let him know it?

With a queenly gesture she pointed to a seat, at the same moment seating herself at a little distance. All the doors remained open; no expression of tenderness, no intimacy, could be indulged in. He reached her his hand; she gave him hers, which he retained, and Cleopatra understood that her

pride had been foolish. The distance that separated their chairs, and scarcely permitted their fingers to touch, was no distance except in the eyes of the world; for them space did not exist. They gave themselves up to each other — entirely, in this fugitive and constrained contact.

"Come, my friend, we must be reasonable," said Cleopatra, assuming the air of an elder sister, that was really imposing. "Yesterday, you — we said foolish things. I think that the bright sun must have made fools of us somehow. Now it is time to come back to reason."

"Madame," said Ulric, slowly, "I have adored you from the moment I first saw you. It was the night of Easter, in the palace chapel. Since, I have thought only of you; I have seen only you; I have lived to bow to you, or to see you pass, when your eyes did not rest upon me. There is no use talking of folly or reason."

"My friend!" pleaded Cleopatra, in a tone of entreaty. She stopped. What could she say to him? She knew he did not exaggerate the truth in the least.

"You would tell me that you are married" —

"Yes," interrupted Cleopatra, eagerly, "and to the best man in the world, and" —

"I know it. Hear, and believe me! For the last month I have sought every means that it is possible for the human brain to invent, to prevent what happened yesterday. You are married: my love is a crime; its name is adultery; it weighs

upon my conscience as heavily as it does upon yours. But my love is stronger than I am, than you are, than honor, than religion even. I love you, and you must be my wife."

His wife! Cleopatra felt the earth tremble beneath her feet. She withdrew her hand; he regained it, but only for a moment.

"Yes, my wife. Divorce exists in our country, as it does in yours. We must be married at once. Life is intolerable, as we are living. I do not intend to talk with you of errors and of concealment, — that would be worthy neither of you nor me. You scarcely know me; but what does it matter since you love me? You, I know you well: I know that you are proud and spotless, — that you are the most highly honored of all the court ladies. You must not fall; I will carry you to my home, as respected as you are to-day; without that I would not have spoken, — I would have died sooner."

"Ah!" murmured Cleopatra, "that is well, indeed!"

"But," resumed he more passionately, "I adore you! You do not know what it is to adore thus, to the exclusion of everything, — even of life that has been. And you, say, dear, have you ever loved?"

"No," replied Cleopatra.

It was true she had never loved. The ambition to be grand duchess, had that anything in common with the experience of to-day? And the sentiment of affection that once she had felt for Boris, was that to be compared to this passion that subjugated her?

"It is necessary," continued the young man, "that you take steps to secure your freedom. I am not rich, much less rich than you. Is that of any account?"

"No," she said again. "Once free, I should be poor."

"But what? You don't say what you are thinking of," he said, with impatience.

Cleopatra made a violent effort to get control of herself, and rose.

"I can't abandon my husband," she said, with a kind of anger. "You talk like one to whom it costs nothing; but I"—

"Then you do not love me enough yet," replied he, disheartened. "If you loved me as I love you"—

"I know nothing about it," cried she. "How could I? I have never dreamed of a similar situation. I only know that the count is my benefactor; that he rescued me from poverty, from care, from other unpleasant circumstances. I only know that I am the joy of his life, and that I can't deprive him of it."

"You are the joy of mine," said Ulric, very low, fixing upon Cleopatra his eyes full of tenderness and passion.

"Yes," she said, with impatience; "but that which you ask from me, and which appears to you very simple, would be on my part a dastardly act."

Ulric rose, very pale.

"Perhaps you are right," he said. "I have only thought of you. I have no duties towards others — or hardly any; but you, — it is different. Forgive me for having troubled your peace."

He started to go. She stepped between him and the door.

"Where?" she asked.

He made a wild gesture.

"Who knows? What does it matter? I shall return to my country."

"I won't — I won't let you," she cried, with such a burst of feeling that he caught her in his arms.

"Then you love me?" he said, with a voice of unspeakable tenderness. "You, also, you have need of my presence to love life. We are engaged, are we not?"

She felt the ground sinking; her powers were failing her; she would have been glad thus to die. He sought to kiss her lips, but she tore herself from his arms.

"No! no!" she said quickly, but low; "not that; it would kill me; I could not bear it."

She fell into a chair; he had taken one of her hands, that he kissed, and she withdrew it.

"I don't know what I said," — smiling as if to implore pardon, — "it must be this life of balls and late nights that I have led this winter. I feel as feeble as if I were dying."

"Dear, you will live! — you will live the beautiful life that my love shall make for you. Then you wish me to stay?"

"Yes!"

"And you will be my wife?"

"Later," said she, rising, though still with unsteady step. "Don't let us speak of that at present, Ulric. I know nothing of life. I mean to say there is a side of life of which I know nothing. Leave me to learn a little of myself. I will talk to you of myself, some day — you will understand why your — your love finds me so inexperienced; I believed it my duty never to love. I had banished love from my existence. Oh, how it avenges itself!"

Timid, blushing like a girl of fifteen, she extended her hand to the one that loved her.

"Let me learn all, but slowly," said she; "these ardent emotions kill me. Perhaps I have husbanded my feelings too much. I had scarcely any use for them in this artificial world. I don't know what I may reply to you in a few days, but to-day let me be by myself. I must think."

Her thoughts turned quickly to the general.

"I don't wish to be either ungrateful or cruel," continued Cleopatra, with melancholy. "I should like my happiness not to disturb the happiness of others."

Ulric's countenance expressed clearly that he thought that impossible.

"Later, later," she said. "For the moment let us be content with our present happiness."

He left her with regret; but he understood that she wanted him to go.

"To-morrow?" he said.

"I don't know — no; not here, under any circumstances. Come in two or three days."

"Two or three days — without seeing you!"

She took on a serious air.

"If our future is to be what you wish it to be we shall be submitted to many tests worse than that."

When alone she ordered to let nobody in, and sought to think, but without being able. Lying back upon a reclining-chair, she softly fell asleep, after a short meditation, without knowing whether the prostration that dominated her were sleep or faintness. It mattered little; death had no fears for her. Was she not already living beyond the real world? When she woke her boudoir was almost obscure. A faint light glittered on the ceiling, — a reflection from the gas-jets in the street. It was with difficulty that she recalled her thoughts, the condition of her soul seemed so strange. After dreaming awhile she came back to herself, and still alone in this silent sanctuary she meditated a few minutes.

She almost blamed Ulric for having stated the situation with such precision, proposed an issue, and made a definite matter of that which she so willingly would have let float in the imponderable ether. What happiness could be greater than these first love emotions, whose freshness constituted their greatest charm? Even their violence, that frightened her, brought with it that delicious sensation of constant danger; she felt that she was frail;

she was not sure but death would come while he pressed his lips upon her hand. What! could one get used to such joys as to let them lose their flavor, without being sure of replacing them with new ones?

While casting a glance at her toilet before dinner there was time for her fears to gradually lessen, and the happiness, born of the evening before, gathered over her excited emotions, as the waters of a beautiful lake are stilled when fair weather returns.

Oh, what richness love had introduced into her life! She experienced the sensation of some new luxury; something to be compared to the softness of velvet, of rich furs in which one wraps the body at the first sting of winter. It seemed as if, up to that day, she had only been a poor, shivering creature at the door of some palace; but, accustomed to her misery, she had endured it without heeding it. Now an enchanted world was opening before her; full of perfumes, of soft silks, of warmth, of light. She penetrated within gently, stupefied, seized with torpor from this unknown sweetness.

One of her first impulses, bizarre though it was, but very sincere, was the longing to share this joy with General Néoutof. Always, from the first of their marriage, she had hastened instinctively to him every time she found a jewel, book, or bouquet in her boudoir or room, desirous to thank him or share her pleasure with him; so it was

natural now to run to her friend, to her confidant, to say to him: "Great happiness has entered my life. I love."

It required a sort of effort to restrain her from this imprudent temptation, so great was her need of sharing this joy.

There has been much jesting about this deplorable habit of lovers to throw themselves into the arms of some confidant, when the most elementary prudence would have warned them to keep silence.

This severity arises, perhaps, from the ignorance that exists concerning the wants of the human heart.

Sorrow has tears for expression; one may weep alone; true grief certainly demands solitude; but joy cannot do without exterior expansion: it is communicative, it seeks response and compliments. It is thus that lovers appear talkative and ridiculous, — when one is not in love himself.

Cleopatra could confide in no one. She was forced to become absorbed in another idea, to the end that she might appear like herself. This was not easy; but she succeeded in luring her husband upon the wrong track, whose good-humor had been preserved. In the evening some friends dropped in, and, as soon as they retired, the countess was too weary to think of anything else other than repose.

The next day she went out to breathe some fresh air; and upon the quay of the Court she met Ulric. It was the favorite promenade in that season, where one was pretty sure to see the high society in line

of march. They exchanged greetings, accompanied by a smile from Cleopatra. It was not much, but better than nothing, she thought. Ulric thought she was cruel, and she might, at least, have invited him to take tea that evening. But he lost both his time and reflections.

The next day the same thing happened, and the young man soon learned a lesson that proved very useful.

His passion had swept him so far away from the proprieties of life that he paid no heed to spectators, or their curiosity. Reared in solitude, a child of nature, without friends, he was, nevertheless, what is called a man of the best society.

His mother was too fine a lady not to have had him perfectly well brought up. Without minding them much he knew and observed all the duties he owed to himself, and all that he owed to society about him.

But the anxiety about "they says," the judgments entertained by a third party concerning, not only our acts, but also our thoughts, — there is where Alsen was entirely ignorant. He fulfilled his part as a gallant man, as an honest man, and, acting in a loyal manner, he never dreamed that any action of his could be falsely interpreted.

The idea that the woman he loved might be wrongfully accused, by indifferent persons, on account of sentiments that he entertained for her, broke in upon him like a flash of light.

This child of twenty-six suddenly bethought him-

self that they were not alone in the world. Till then, as he never had failed to show to Cleopatra the respect she was accustomed to, he did not think she could be injured by his love; but in seeing her obliged to speak to ten different persons, and greet twenty bores, before she was able to show him any recognition, he became aware of the peril which he brought upon her, in manifesting such evident adoration as he did.

A very wise old woman once said of a calumniated couple that there was nothing criminal between them; she would swear to it, for they looked at each other. There is no call for suspicion, except of lovers who in society dare not look into each other's faces.

Through excess of prudence Alsen came near compromising Cleopatra; for all of a sudden, accused by his conscience, he formed a severe resolution, and, falling from one extreme into another, he affected not to see her at all. The countess had often observed these lover's intrigues, these innocent tricks, which deceive no one; but she was caught in this snare, and immediately feared that she had wounded Ulric.

"Come to-morrow," she said, stopping before him to say good-morning.

The long lashes drooped over his bright eyes, and he bowed to her with ceremony. The grand duke came upon them at this moment in his little drojky; he looked at them with marked attention. Cleopatra seemed changed; less certain of her

empire, she had not the same haughty indifference; it was a woman whose soul was troubled.

At a glance this sharp observer of women guessed the truth, or nearly so. The idea of any deep passion had not even grazed the surface of his brain; but he believed that the countess was touched by the revenge of Cupid, as he said it to himself with a smile. "Well," he concluded mentally, "this boy is handsome enough for her to fall in love with. It is somewhat commonplace, and brings this proud statue to a more ordinary level; but Néoutof ought to expect as much."

He passed on, his horse at a rapid trot, bowing to them with gracious dignity; and Cleopatra felt easy when she saw that he did not turn back.

It was a beautiful day; a crowd of ladies were out to take the air. Irene did not fail of improving the opportunity. She made her appearance on the arm of her husband, who was growing decidedly stout, although she was getting very thin again.

"Ah! my charming sister," said Charamirof; "delighted to see you. Are you so absorbed in yourself that you never go out nowadays?"

"My husband is not very well, and I keep him company," answered Cleopatra; "but I was at the May parade. You did not see me, my dear brother; you were better employed."

Irene looked at her husband as if violently disturbed. For some time she had imagined, either with reason or without, that he was deceiving her,

and she would easily have thrown to the dogs the reputation of her best friend if it could have enlightened her. But Cleopatra and the culprit had both an innocent air.

"My dear Irene," said Charamirof, "since we have the good fortune to meet your sister I will leave you together. I want to walk on the Perspective Nevsky, and you know that it is not the proper place for ladies to go to. Good-by."

He disappeared with such lightness as one would scarcely expect from so portly a person; leaving his wife with increased disquietude, and his sister-in-law very much inclined to laugh.

"He has flown away," said Cleopatra; "shall we walk along a little way together, Irene? That will look well; they like among the great to see families united."

She signified, imperceptibly, the Winter Palace, that they were approaching at that moment.

Irene was thinking of her husband, and did not reply.

"And the baby?" demanded Cleopatra.

"Thank you, it is superb; and your husband?"

Thus they exchanged the usual compliments, without much concern about responses.

"I was going to say, also, 'Thank you, he is superb;' but that is not true. Lately his gout has caused him to suffer much; but he is better now."

"Ah! so much the better!" said Irene, in a tone that meant "so much the worse."

After a moment of silence, she added, "Say, Cleopatra, he is eighty, — your husband?"

"No, my dear; not yet, — seventy-seven only."

"That is good: you will soon be a widow."

Cleopatra started. Widow — free — yes, that might happen; only would it be soon, or would it be late?

"What makes you say that?" she demanded.

Irene looked at her, amazed.

"Don't you find that natural? But, my dear, there can't be two opinions upon that point. You will marry again, I hope."

"Perhaps," said Cleopatra, watching the blue, sparkling waves of the magnificent river.

"You say 'perhaps'; I say, 'certainly.' I expect to see you take a young, handsome husband."

"Why?" murmured the countess.

"Because, you see, my dear, after Lent one wants very much to get an indigestion. Don't you know where my husband has gone?"

"No," replied Cleopatra, who found her sister's conversation very incoherent.

"Well, I am afraid he is on the way to get an indigestion, — he also. Don't you understand? Well, no matter; your intelligence was never very quick. Good-by, I must go home; it is cold."

They shook hands and separated.

"A singular thing, this relationship," thought Cleopatra; "between my sister and me there is not an atom of sympathy, and Ulric, whom I do not know, so to speak, is so dear to me, — so dear!"

The ray of sunshine this thought evoked warmed her all the way till she reached home. Upon entering she found the house in strange disorder. The footman was not at his post in the antechamber; the doors were all open.

She advanced, and an odor of ether struck her at once. With an anxious presentiment she flew to her husband's apartment. At the threshold of his work-room she met the physician.

"What is it, doctor?" she demanded, prepared for the worst.

"Be easy, madame; your husband had a fainting fit, and, thinking it was an attack of paralysis, they sent for me. Happily it is nothing. The general will be completely restored in two or three days."

He bowed and hurried away, like a man whose minutes are counted.

Cleopatra stood a moment immovable. Néoutof had been very ill, then!

The doctor — perhaps he concealed the truth from her. She dared not think. Instantly coming to herself, she entered the room.

"Joy of my eyes!" said the invalid, very low, reaching her feebly his hand. "Your old husband has once more escaped his old mistress — Death."

"God be thanked!" responded she, with sincere fervor.

No, decidedly, she could not think coldly of seeing this man die.

And her torn heart seemed to bleed at every fibre.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DARK SIDE OF BRIGHT THINGS.

NÉOUTOF soon recovered from the sickness that had frightened his household, and at the end of a few days he was able to ride out in an open carriage, — that which had not happened for a long time. Their departure for Tsarskoé-Sélo was delayed until the last days of May.

Ulric went every other day to spend a quarter of an hour with Cleopatra. Often he found her with some intruder, when he would be seated and maintain the most unbroken silence. He had been reared in solitude, and did not like to talk; and that was how some gossips had given him the title of "the silent Scandinavian."

But he was not offended, claiming that words are silver but silence is gold, and that one is to be pitied, indeed, who is forced to exhaust himself for hours seeking to say something when he has nothing to say. If the intruder held out, Ulric would rise at the end of the quarter of an hour, that he had sworn to himself not to exceed, and, bowing gravely, would kiss the hand she openly offered him and go. All this was entirely in conformity to the best usages of society, and there could be nothing to criticise.

Alone, it was different; he would seat himself at a proper distance, so that a chance-comer might not suspect anything, then he would take Cleopatra's hand and retain it in his. She sought to talk, to maintain, for self-love if nothing else, the appearance of keeping up a conversation. Futile effort! she was overcome with a delicious torpor, and, unable to pronounce a syllable, she yielded to the magnetism of the dear presence.

A noise in the neighboring room, a cry in the street, sometimes the fall of a leaf from the flower-stands, would cause them to start and awake from the dream; she would then withdraw her hand and seek to renew their conversation. Then it was that she would scold him tenderly, counsel him to be patient, and entreat him to learn to wait. He listened, his eyes fixed upon hers, without interrupting her, and when she stopped, a smile upon her lips, and a ray in her eyes, he said to her sorrowfully: —

"We are living in sin. Do you not fear that God in his wrath will smite us?"

"What harm do we do?" stammered Cleopatra, seeking to defend herself.

"We are guilty, before God. He who has wished for adultery has committed it already in his heart."

In vain, with all her practical good sense, this woman, broken into the yoke of the world, sought to solve the enormous difference that separates the intention of an act — the premeditation

of crime — from crime itself; he would not be persuaded. His religious education, the severity of his former instruction, had left ineffaceable traces upon his character. He had not been strong enough to struggle with his passion. He wished to justify it by a legitimate union, in the end that his conscience might be at peace.

"But," said Cleopatra, one day, "can you not see that we should have committed murder if Néoutof should die of grief, or of an attack, the day I shall speak to him of divorce?"

"No!" replied d'Alsen; "you would be doing right in trying to recover your liberty. It is for him to show that he is not selfish."

"Ulric, you are cruel, and I am afraid of you."

"I love you!" replied he, taking the slender hand of the young woman in his, that were like ice.

She could make no reply.

He was cruel, in fact, because he was selfish, and selfish because he was in love; and, more than that, he could not believe in the existence of a deep feeling in the heart of a man as old as Néoutof. Truly he was a child of nature, — one of those beings that, reared far from other men, are forced to discover everything for themselves without accepting anything from the instruction of others. He had not had as yet great experience with suffering; he only believed in what he knew, — the death of an adored mother, and the impossibility of marrying the woman he

loved, and he thought those trials above all others.

Néoutof and his wife were settled at Tsarskoé-Sélo. The second year of his marriage the general bought a beautiful house, surrounded by a large and shady garden. It was at Sophia, in the suburbs of the imperial city. It was there that he spent the summer, being no longer able to endure the long voyage necessary to visit his estates in Tver.

The settlement at Sophia gave less liberty to Ulric than he had enjoyed at St. Petersburg. The garden where he would so much have loved to walk with Cleopatra was generally the retreat of her husband, who passed the pleasant hours of the day there, beneath a tent constructed expressly to protect him.

By chance, which was not merely chance perhaps, Ulric, up to that time, had never been introduced to Count Néoutof. Would Cleopatra be able, in these new conditions of existence, to prevent this meeting, that seemed inevitable?

For several days they were not able to see each other. D'Alsen had not dared to take up his residence in the same town; he had, therefore, rented small apartments at Pavlovsk, from whence he could go to Tsarskoé-Sélo every day without attracting too much attention. By some wicked fate it was ordered that each of them should arrive every time, at any place, wherever it might be, five minutes after the other had departed.

Grown nervous by these repeated disappointments to see each other and to speak, they thought of each other with less tenderness than anger, and the suffering they endured they sought instinctively to make reciprocal.

It was a day in June, one of those marvellous days which have only one imperfection, — that of being too warm, — that Néoutof, concerning whom the grand duke had often sent to inquire, determined to try to get as far as the palace, to pay him his regards. Attended by his footman he mounted (not without some difficulty) the low barouche that was known to every one in the city and the suburbs. His wife saw him set out, greeted him with a gesture of the hand, then very quickly, in a sort of fever, she started for the park. She was sure of meeting Ulric that day; she felt, she knew he was there, and that he was waiting for her.

She directed her steps towards the pier, where a fleet of barks from all countries wait the amateurs, from the pirogue of the savage Orinoco, to the bark of the Léman, with its two sails crossed, that give it the air of a bird. This is the place where one is generally to be found; the place for idle gossip and rendezvous. There are never many persons here at a time, but there are always plenty of interested parties wandering about, waiting for the wished-for moment.

D'Alsen was there in full view, like a great, inexperienced child. For eight days he had passed two or three hours, silent and morose, scanning the

promenaders, without daring even to take the paddle of a périssoire, or of a podoscaphe, to give to his prolonged delay the slightest evidence of his possessing any nautical taste.

He had a fine, quick eye; for, on perceiving the light dress of the countess, he withdrew aside without looking around.

She, on her part, had seen him, and stopped to talk an instant with this one and that. Having thus consumed several minutes, which to him seemed like centuries, while his heart was beating, and his temples throbbing, she retired in the direction of a great, open sheet of water, a deserted locality, almost abandoned, mouldy, where no one ever walked; for fear of damp, said some; fevers, said others, and really no one knew why.

A moment later they met. It was almost a shock. They could not fall into each other's arms; they looked at each other with a hostile air.

How they had suffered during these unending days! She more than he, perhaps; but he did not believe it, and she had no desire to let him know.

"Well," said he, "do you believe that such an existence as this can be endured?"

"No!" answered she, fearlessly.

"And it is you, —you alone who condemn us to this torture. Without considering that we may be suspected at any moment"—

Cleopatra's pride was awakened at this reproach.

"That will not be my fault," she said, "but yours. It is for you not to commit any imprudent

act. A short visit at my house now and then, at the hour that the general takes his nap, would not be remarked by any one."

"I do not wish to expose myself to the chance of meeting your husband!" he said, full of secret rage, against this inaccessible and victorious enemy.

"I am indeed exposed to suspicion on your account, and I do not complain," she said, haughtily.

With their looks they measured each other and found their pride equal.

"This must end," said Ulric, with closed teeth; "to-morrow demand a divorce from your husband."

Beneath the real Cleopatra, vanquished by love, there slumbered the Cleopatra of old, who had formerly said, "The frailty of others serves me; I am not made to love." The latter wakened suddenly, and regarded the new Cleopatra with disdain. What, had it come to this, — that she was to receive the orders of a man? Was a man to think himself her master, and pretend to direct her life, and impose upon her an action that she found odious, and, more than that, so deeply humiliating? Twenty years of independence had made of the obscure Mlle. Bakhtof the Countess Néoutof, Lady of the Palace; — she had never voluntarily bent her head beneath any other authority except that of reason; her old self rose up before her to prevent the violation of her rights. She loved Ulric, certainly; but she had done wrong in allowing him to think he was her master.

"I shall not do what you ask of me," she said coldly. "It is a bad action."

"And I," replied he, with lips pallid from excess of proud suffering, "I can't live longer with a troubled conscience. You must follow me, or we must part."

Some voice in the depths of Cleopatra's soul cried: "Follow him — no matter where, no matter at what price!" But her dignity hushed this cry of nature.

"I accept no conditions," said she.

They looked at each other again with a threatening air; then, when Ulric's anger suddenly yielded: —

"Dear, I adore you! You don't know what you do. I am so weary of struggling and suffering!"

"Do you think that I am not?" said Cleopatra, turning away her eyes.

"Then do what I demand."

"No!"

They walked at hazard up and down the damp alleys; suddenly Néoutof's low barouche passed the street that borders the park beneath them. Cleopatra felt stronger. No, she would not carry death to the protector of her youth. If need be, she would die rather than commit such an act.

"I am going away, then," said d'Alsen, with a broken voice. "My dream vanishes; my life has no further object. You do not love me."

Proud silence closed Cleopatra's lips. Why

would he thus misinterpret her? That then was what happened when one loves without knowing the person! He took upon himself to be her judge, — this stranger, that by accident had fallen into her life. In what name? By what right had he come to give her orders, and pervert her conscience?

"Good-by!" he said, with a strange, almost wild, gesture. "O God! how could you have made me so wretched! It is my just punishment."

"It is the punishment of my faults," thought Cleopatra.

She would have liked to say something cruel to him, take him by the arm, kiss his lips, or push him away brutally, she did not know which; her hands were tempted in the vicinity of this adored being — hated perhaps.

"I don't know! I don't know!" she thought, desperately. "Let him go, for he steals away my reason."

She passed her hand over her eyes, as if to clear them.

The little barouche of the general was seen at the end of the avenue; one would have said that he was intentionally lingering about the park. Perhaps Néoutof was looking for his wife, to save her the trouble of returning home afoot.

"Cleopatra!" said Ulric, low.

"What do you wish?"

"Give me your hand to kiss for the last time, that I may remember it to my death."

"If he touches me, I am lost," thought the unhappy one. "All my strength is leaking through my fingers."

"You refuse? Ah! you never loved me! I thought you did; you also — you have believed it, since you have told me so. It was a dream — I shall never see you again."

He did not weep, but his grave voice rung out the short phrases like a knell; and his beautiful eyes, always full of life and tenderness, looked as if they were veiled with crape, like torches that are carried at funerals.

"Not here," said Cleopatra; "here I cannot talk with you; I am afraid of everything."

Ulric shook his head.

"That must come to an end," said he; "if it is No, as well to-day — You will not do what I ask?"

"I cannot," replied she.

"Then good-by — it is the third time that I have said it. How feeble one is when he loves! You are courageous — you, because you do not love."

The unfortunate! Each time that he repeated the phrase he lost all the ground he had gained. Cleopatra's heart was wounded, but she had a soul too high to defend herself.

"Come to see me at my house," she said; "I wish it."

"When?"

"When it pleases you."

"It is an order. I will obey. I will come to see you before I leave."

She stood impassive. Let him go, since he misunderstood her to such a degree. Ah! how cruel was love! What ferocity it employed to soften the heart, so as to rend it more easily the next moment!

They bowed, and Ulric retired down a side alley.

Cleopatra looked for a while at the open sheet of water.

The end of all her troubles, — was it not there?

One could easily die when saturated with sufferings. It was an end.

She followed along, with a slow step, in the direction of the pier. There, surrounded by a crowd of friends and acquaintances, Néoutof, with a quick and mirthful eye, was seated in his barouche, listening to the news of the day. Upon seeing his wife, he burst out joyously. "Ah! the countess!" said he, with his thick voice, "Which of your lovers have you left in despair to-day, madame? You are prodigiously beautiful!"

He loved to treat her thus in public. The old French gallantry was really noble as it escaped the lips of this husband, so unlike all the others.

Cleopatra smiled feebly.

"All the lovers have returned home at this hour, for the wind is rising. You should do the same, sir. Will you please offer me a place by you?"

"Only too happy! To tell the truth, I was waiting for you."

She was seated, and the two ponies snorted and

started off. The spectators, enchanted, regarded them as they disappeared. This conversation had amused them like a scene of comedy perfectly played, and left upon their lips the smile that in the theatre accompanies sweet emotions.

"They are truly perfect," said some one in the group. "Néoutof has found a pearl!"

"Bah!" said a troubled soul, "that is nothing but appearances. It is the bottom that should be seen."

But this thought was lost, and in twenty houses of the city it was repeated that night that Néoutof was really happy in having married this admirable Mlle. Bakhtof.

CHAPTER XX.

GOSSIPING.

CLEOPATRA was satisfied with what she had done. She could not consider Ulric's farewell as anything serious. Folks talk about leaving; but they never leave. He had well merited her severity. He had assumed such control of her that she had only performed a duty in asserting her liberty. Why would he not be patient? She was patient, and God knew she loved him well, although he pretended that she was so indifferent. Even the thought of touching his hand caused her entire being to thrill with emotion. He had been absurd, and she had acted wisely.

This forced argument, composed of pride and bitterness, fell to the ground in less than twenty-four hours, and intolerable suffering set in. She wanted to see him, to be assured that he was not unhappy. She was thirsting to look into his eyes, to see if the tears had not burned away their brightness. Twenty times in an hour she started as if she heard Ulric's desperate cry. If she dared she would write him; but that was an obstacle in the way of her dignity; a letter would be the opening of an intrigue, the first step towards an abyss, and Cleopatra would not fall.

She withdrew within herself, helpless and in despair. There was nothing in the world that belonged to her except his love, and this love she had wounded. Like a bird struck with an arrow, it lay bleeding at her feet, the wing broken. It would die, perhaps; but she dared not touch it, not even to lay some balm upon the wound.

The third day, waking after a night of heavy sleep and agonizing dreams, she thought for the moment that the world was going to end, and the sun never would rise again. Her eyes were so swollen by the tears she had wept that she was unable to open them. She was terrified, and believed she was blind; but at the call of the bell the maid ran and threw open her window, and she saw life return with the light of day.

Cleopatra sighed. Still another day to live! And what would this day bring? Suffering, assuredly. Why had she not abided by her old dream, — to live without love? Regrets were too late now. Too late also to call Ulric; he did not wish to see her; he bore her a grudge.

For the first time a doubt penetrated the soul of the countess, and her upright spirit received the first shock that was to warp it. She questioned herself if she was not exaggerating her duties, and if she ought to remain the wife of Néoutof, — if she acted rightly in sacrificing Ulric's happiness and her own to the last years of an old man.

It was a flash; justice and goodness immediately gained the ascendency; but the lightning had

scorched the heart of the tree. The bark remained, the marrow was destroyed. From that hour Cleopatra was no longer the same.

It was raining, a fine rain, without any pity, that seemed born with the world, and destined to last forever. Cleopatra cast a resigned look into the garden, covered with running brooklets, and then presented herself at the apartment of her husband to read the morning papers. Immediately followed the breakfast, that she lengthened out as long as she could; she feared to find herself alone, and forced to think. She was weary of thinking, as one is of walking. Her head did not ache, but she was suffering from unutterable weariness. But soon her husband had the appearance of drowsing, and she was at liberty to retire.

The idea of solitude filled her with horror. She thought of ordering her carriage and going out for a round of calls; but compassion for her servants, as well as for the horses, forbade her to expose them to the inclemency of such weather.

She had taken up a book, though sure of not understanding it, when she heard the wheels of a carriage grate on the wet sand. Who would dare to face this deluge if not Ulric?

She stood, shuddering. It was General Trédine who entered, pompous and stiff; in reality the worst gossip of the court, — since Kamoutzine had gone to the next world.

"You did not expect me, eh?" he observed, entering. "I have come to chat with you. Upon

my word there is no one to talk with. Did you know that all the pretty women in the city have taken it into their heads to fall in love? Vara Lepkine with her cousin; Sophie Lavrof with Lieutenant Sourof, and Natalie with her husband! Yes, with her husband! There is no more talking with them; either they do not listen to you, or they talk of the loved object! There is no one but you, countess, you alone of all the world, that are above the frailties of the body, as well as the soul!"

Cleopatra smiled. Often this prattle had amused her in times gone by; now he seemed to her tedious, and even coarse, beneath his covering of society manners. But this dull companion was better than solitude, and she encouraged him with a few words; provided that Ulric did not come, thinking she was alone!

Trédine continued his little scandals. It was a collection of anecdotes accurately made out. He understood well how to fill the rôle of a courtier, even to the art of pleasing the most inattentive listener. He could talk for hours without repeating the same remark, which was no small advantage, and which showed an excellent memory.

An hour and a half passed in this fashion. Cleopatra, at first preoccupied, at last became interested in the conversation of her guest, who threw so much conviction into his recitals. She grew insensible to her sorrow, but insensible as the wounded upon a bed of pain, who sinks into a state of torpor, which is, nevertheless, suffering. Trédine rose to

go, and, according to his deplorable custom, — the only want of good manners one could reproach him for, — he stood, still searching in his mind for any bit of news that he might have forgotten.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a gesture that signified that he had recalled something.

"Well," said the countess, with complaisance.

"Young d'Alsen, you know, that Swede who is so silent, — you have lately improved him a little, eh?"

"I know, I know. Well?" exclaimed Cleopatra, overcome with impatience.

"Well, he is going to leave."

"Going to leave?" repeated the unhappy woman, supporting herself by the back of a chair.

"Yes, the climate does not agree with him, they say. He has asked to be recalled. Good-day, countess."

He went, swinging his heavy body, with the air of a conqueror. Cleopatra called to him: —

"Monsieur d'Alsen, is he ill? You said the climate did not agree with him?"

"Upon my word I know nothing about it. I met him this morning; he looked like a corpse; he had been to his legation for formalities. Is that a matter that interests you, countess?"

"Why — yes! his uncle recommended him to me."

"Oh, yes. I had forgotten. These Swedes, you know, my dear countess, they have always some phantasmagory in their heads. Good-day!"

He departed, leaving Cleopatra struck to the heart.

It was true then; he was going; with him life fled. She should surely die the moment of his departure; she should die for the simple reason that he was the sun of her existence, and she could not live away from his sunshine.

She rose up suddenly, making a great effort, and went to a small desk.

She chose a sheet of paper bearing her monogram, and with a bold hand she wrote: —

"Do not go: I will do as you have asked me."

The note was sealed, and committed to a footman, with orders to take it immediately to the house of M. d'Alsen, and wait for a reply; then Cleopatra looked within herself.

She was vanquished at last, and ceased to rebel.

She could have lived, fighting with him. Cruel misunderstandings would have exhausted her less, provided that they were always to be followed by reconciliation. But absence, exile, — for really he banished her from his life, — it was more than she was able to bear up under. She had said that she would die sooner than cause Néoutof to suffer; she thought now that she would sooner kill Néoutof and die than to cause Ulric to suffer. She remained motionless, plunged in horror of herself and everything that did not concern the one she loved.

The rain continued to pour.

Again the sound of wheels was heard without;

to this she paid no heed; but a well-known step caused her to lift her head. Before her upon the threshold of the salon stood Ulric; he was scarcely to be recognized; wasted by three days of suffering as if it had been the sickness of a month.

A feeble cry escaped her, torn from the depths of her soul, and she fell into the arms that he opened to receive her. He retained her, and softly — with no resistance from her — he kissed the closed eyes, the pale cheeks, and lips partly open.

A shudder, now and then, passed through her frame, but she remained as she had fallen, upon his shoulder, faint, or passing away. He thought she was dying.

"Darling, darling! wake!" he cried, clasping her arm with force.

She opened her eyes, and he seated her in an arm-chair.

"You will live, say?" she murmured, clinging to his arm.

"Since it is your wish — but you?"

"I — I will do what you require of me. I will go and talk with him soon."

She made an effort to rise, but was too feeble.

"Wait," said he; "look at me! speak to me!" Oh, if you knew my misery! They told you I was going away?"

"Yes, just now — don't go; I can't bear it."

"We will leave together," he murmured very low.

"Oh, yes!"

She remained motionless, looking at him with ecstasy.

"Now," she said, slowly, "I must speak. I had sworn to be an honest and faithful wife to my husband; but since you have embraced me I am no longer honest or faithful. Now I must act."

D'Alsen bent forward to kiss her beautiful face, shining at once with intense joy and sorrow; she made a slow gesture, as if to push him away.

"No, no — not here — not to-day; wait till I have spoken — I did not understand you when you said that in wishing for adultery one has already committed it in one's heart; but I understand now. Do not increase the weight of my sin; I will speak at once, when you have left."

She looked at him with singular persistence, as if she was addressing him some mute question; suddenly: —

"Go," she said; "I am strong. I have the courage. I start."

She rose, her eyes fixed on him.

"If you knew," she continued, very low, "the intense longing I have to kiss your face, and drink in your life from your eyes; but no, not here — it is horrible — it is cowardly — it is shameful! Go! I will write you."

"When shall I see you?"

"When I am free. Go, my love, my joy!"

She retreated slowly towards the door of her chamber (he remaining motionless), and stopped at the threshold within the curtains.

"*Au revoir!*" she said, with a voice that he scarcely heard.

And she disappeared like a shadow.

Alone in her room, Cleopatra slid down upon her knees before the holy images. She wished to pray, but she did not know what to ask. Every vow that she formulated at that moment, was it not a falsehood?

"Give me strength, O God!" she cried at last; "strength and courage. I thought, just now, I would be bold. I see, indeed, that I have not the courage to strike with a steady hand. O God, help me!"

But she did not feel that sweet warmth that accompanies the prayers of the faithful.

"Alone, wholly alone," she said; "alone, without support, without friends, without God! Ah, yes! alone — facing boldly the world for the love of him!"

CHAPTER XXI.

STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

CLEOPATRA entered the apartment of her husband with emotions similar to those felt by Christians in former times when they entered the arena; with this difference, that she entertained no fear for herself, only for the one she was going to strike.

Néoutof, half reclining in his arm-chair, was studying the ceiling; he saw, perhaps, pass between the gray wall and himself the merry years of his youth, when he had been loved by women and adored by soldiers; boudoirs and battle-ground, both had pleasant remembrances for him, for his life had been happy and full. Was it not a wonderful chance that, at the moment when his years began to seem heavy to him, he should have bethought himself to come to St. Petersburg, where he had met this delicious creature that bore his name?

She was better than a daughter, for she possessed, besides, more devotion; the charm of a wife, beautiful and attractive, who lived to please, even an old man, chained to a bed of suffering.

In this concert of little flutes and hautboys that sung the glory of Cleopatra in the soul of the gen-

eral, there was secretly mingled a funeral note, carefully muffled beneath the other joyous songs. Certainly, Cleopatra had changed lately, within two or three months. She had no longer that marvellous readiness of wit, that delicate taste, that made her such a wonderful conversationalist. But the most beautiful sky, had it not clouds that transiently obscure the brightness of the day?

Néoutof had reached that point in his meditations when Cleopatra stood before him. Only to see the troubled face, the tragic eyes, and he felt it was the funeral note that he had heard. He straightened himself up in his seat, and with his hands clasping the arm of his chair, bent forward to examine more closely the features of his wife, but he addressed her no question. It was for her to speak.

"My friend," said Cleopatra, with a dying voice, "I have something painful to say to you" —

"I can see it well!" growled the general, without ceasing to look at her.

"Up to this moment I have done my best to make you happy, — have I succeeded?"

"You have, indeed, only too well succeeded," grumbled he, between his teeth.

"It is the remembrance of this pleasure that I have been able to contribute to your life that I invoke to-day, so that I may be favored with your indulgence."

"You cannot wish — you cannot wish" —

He could not bring himself to express his thought, it seemed so enormous to him.

Cleopatra, still standing, as if before a judge, put one hand upon the table for support.

"Be seated, madame, be seated," said Néoutof, rising to get her a chair. "I beg a thousand pardons for not thinking of this before."

She sat down, overcome. Suddenly she took courage and spoke more clearly: —

"When I married you, sir, I did not think I was created for any other purpose than to be the devoted companion of your old age. My heart did not care for that which interests most of women. In a word, I entered your house as one enters a convent, with this difference, that you gave me the enjoyment of a fortune and a great name. I swear to you, sir, that I wished to be ever and only your friend, and that I took that oath upon my Bible."

A sob rose to her throat at the remembrance of that happy time. She repressed it, and continued firmly: "Since recently a change has taken place within me. I was deceived in thinking myself different from others. I have met with a person who has decided my life. My heart has spoken."

"An old lover!" exclaimed Néoutof, fixing upon her his formidable eyes.

The figure of Boris came again to disturb his peace.

"No; you do not know him," Cleopatra hastened to add.

"And you love him?"

"I love him."

Silence followed. Néoutof breathed with difficulty. The countess feared that he would lose consciousness; but his old body was strong to endure the sufferings of the soul as well as the tortures of the gout.

"Why did you tell me?" began the general, at the end of a moment. "Why did you not leave me in ignorance? — that would, at least, have been more charitable."

She shook her head with all her former pride. "No, I should have been guilty. I present myself before you because I am innocent, and I will not bring shame upon your white hair."

He drew her so violently towards him that she fell upon her knees. He kissed her brow with ardor, and then, reaching her his hand to rise: —

"Forgive me, countess, an action of which I was not master. You have touched my — yes, my old heart."

He broke down and sobbed aloud.

"My friend — my benefactor!" cried she, weeping bitterly.

He dried his tears quickly.

"No useless emotions," he said, with a strong voice. "Evidently you wish all to be open between us. It is cruel for me, but honorable for both of us; you have done right."

Cleopatra sat in her chair; anticipation, almost joyous, caused her heart to beat; it seemed as if it

was not to be so difficult. She might have expected more opposition to obtain her liberty.

They remained silent for several minutes, the soul so full of thoughts that they could not talk. Finally Néoutof began again.

"What are your intentions now? Your life is changed. What will you do?"

No, it was not so easy as she had just thought, to pronounce the word "divorce." If the idea had come to the general it would have been a different thing.

Seeing her hesitate, he added, with slight bitterness: —

"I am not a serious obstacle; my days are numbered; my death will soon restore you your liberty. Will that suffice you?"

She did not speak.

"What, then, do you wish? Speak, madame; really, you make me afraid with your silence," he said, striking the table with a blow from a hand that once was powerful, but at present feeble and unarmed.

"I have come to ask you to authorize me to seek a divorce," said Cleopatra, as pale as the pearls of her necklace.

"Divorce!"

Néoutof rose, trembling.

"Divorce!" cried he, with a voice of thunder. "Divorce from me! Public scandal! Formal avowal of shame! Madame, you have lost your reason!"

Cleopatra rose, and they looked in each other's eyes.

"Divorce, eh? Who asked you to confide such secrets to me? Were you not free to act at your pleasure? Am I a troublesome husband? Why don't you do as others do? At least, if you behave improperly, I will have the right to kill you and your lover, and no one would call me ridiculous!"

His white hair, rising up, surrounded his brow like a frightful aureole. He had never been more terrifying at the head of an army.

"My conscience," said Cleopatra, feebly; "my honor — yours."

She looked at him, not to entreat, but to reproach him for comparing her with others, when a strange sickness seized her; the noise of rising waters filled her ears; her heart sunk. Suddenly oppressed with slow mortal agony, she made a gesture with the hand, as if to drive away the suffering, and glided insensible down upon the carpet.

The general rang the silver clock furiously, that served him as a bell, which brought his valet de chambre quickly to his side.

"Call some one!" commanded Néoutof. "Carry the countess to her bed; have her clothes removed and send for a physician. Warn me when that has been done."

His orders were executed, and in less than a quarter of an hour he entered, for the first time,

the sleeping-room of his wife, as timid as a youth.

She had scarcely come to her senses. White as the pillow upon which her beautiful hair formed a nimbus, there was nothing sombre in her face except her eyes, of the color of deep sapphire, which interrogated anxiously the door.

The general drew near, leaning upon his staff. He, also, was very pale, and his lips trembled while he strove to make his voice firm.

"You fainted, dear countess," he said; "the doctor will come soon; but it is nothing, be assured. Will you allow me to wait for the doctor by you?"

She made a feeble sign of assent, and he seated himself near the bed in an arm-chair. The room was very simple, in spite of the luxury of the furniture; the bed, narrow and white as that of a young girl, ought not, it seemed, to shelter any but peaceful dreams. Yes, it was the apartment of an honest woman, where lies and frauds had never found a harbor.

The doctor arrived at once. He ordered sleep, perfect quiet, and the absence of all emotions.

"Very marked predominance of the nervous system," he said. "I see nothing to cause anxiety for the moment; twenty-four hours of repose, and there will be no traces left of the attack; but it is necessary that the countess be very regular in her life, and free from everything that might excite her."

"H'm!" growled Néoutof, leading him to the door; "you might as well order your apothecaries to sell quiet. Rest for a woman that receives, or returns, fifteen visits a day!"

"The ordinary course of life and my prescriptions, are in effect very contradictory," said the physician, smiling; "but allow me to observe to Your Excellency that it is not medicine which can recede."

Néoutof returned to the bed of his wife. Her head was turned towards the wall, and Cleopatra appeared to sleep. The women were arranging her clothes in the adjoining room, the door of which was open. No one could see him. He bent over the invalid and kissed her white brow, drowned in the shadows of her hair, with a sort of awkwardness.

Cleopatra opened her eyes.

"You forgive me?" she said, very low.

"We will talk of that," responded he, with slight roughness, "later."

He withdrew, seeking to hush on the floor the repeated strokes of his cane.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WILL.

THE following day Cleopatra rose as soon as it was morning. The battle was far from being won, and the time was precious. More than once she had felt that her life was frail, but now it seemed as if she held it no longer in her hand; the thread of her existence had become so tenuous that it escaped her vision.

Another would have stopped to gather force, perhaps lose ground. Cleopatra did not belong to that class: she would struggle as long as she had a breath to spend.

The general was surprised to see her enter his room as usual, about ten o'clock, at the moment when he was going to send to inquire for her.

"Sir," said Cleopatra, as she witnessed his surprise, "I should not have suffered that fainting-fit yesterday but for the burden of thought upon a subject that occupies me to the exclusion of everything else. I am weary and worn, and I rely upon your mercy for a solution that shall let me know my fate."

Néoutof maintained a mournful silence.

He had passed a cruel night, and all the anodyne drops of the apothecary had not been able

to bring a wink of sleep. The formidable question raised by his wife was one of those the possibility of which never occurs to a person until the day when is heard the cry: "It cannot be otherwise."

This young woman loved — what was more natural? She loved, according to the law of her nature, a being probably young and beautiful as herself; honest both of them, they discarded clandestinity; that which they wished was the right to found a family, or, perhaps, the simple permission to be happy. They had justice and truth on their side. It was he, Néoutof, that was the obstacle in the way.

He had recalled the words pronounced by himself in the conversation that accompanied the offer of his name. Tormented by the gout and a multitude of infirmities that this disease brings with it, the general had not thought it possible to live more than one or two years at the longest. He had said it, and all believed it. He recalled also the constrained smile seen on most faces, at the bravado that he uttered the night of his marriage. He had invited his guests to his silver wedding. Certainly, at that time no one thought that he could live five years longer.

Cleopatra was waiting with an attitude that betrayed the greatest anxiety.

"I have encroached upon her rights," he said to himself bitterly. "One should keep his word, cost what it may. I promised this charming girl that she soon should be a widow. It was indis-

creet on my part to enjoy the latitude she has offered me. One must not be selfish, morbleu! One should know enough to go before he is shown the door. Our old proverb, does it not declare 'the intruding host is worse than a Tartar'?"

It was true. Cleopatra had inspired within him a love for life. He had grown young again beneath her vigilance and care, by the amusement that her intelligence and charms had introduced into a life that had few attractions before.

"It is to be regretted," thought Néoutof, "that she should have been obliged to summon me to pay at a fixed date. But she is right; I am wrong."

In the eyes of the general the divorce proposed by the countess was inadmissible. It was an unnatural solution of the question, which arranged nothing, and which, moreover, cast a sort of ridicule upon one of the married couple, — upon both, very probably, — and which, at least, would call up disagreeable remarks. Besides, this plan had the misfortune — very great in the eyes of the general — to deprive the divorced wife of the fortune of her husband, which he regarded as robbing the one who had made the last years of his old age so pleasant. So, as the just and God-fearing souls of Ulric and Cleopatra had rejected all that was not legitimate, the clear and positive intelligence of the general looked square in the face the only issue which was to permit him to restore liberty to his wife.

It was death — a death as natural as possible — that Cleopatra even might guard no suspicion. Néoutof had plenty of hurtful drugs at hand, with which he could easily poison himself. It was thus he resolved to die. Had he not looked death in the face so many times that it had become for him a pillow companion?

Alas! one dies easily on a battle-field, in the midst of bullets or before bayonets; one bares his breast voluntarily to a blow which would strike a friend, or even a fellow-mortal; one dies heroically in his bed when he sees death approaching, and would wear a steady face in the midst of his friends. But to say to himself, "To-morrow you will cease to live because you are too many in the life of another," it is cruel and bitter, and the bravest turns away his head as he would before a nauseous potion. Cleopatra waited silently his response, while the general thus recalled the thoughts of the night.

At last he raised his eyes to her and said, "You will soon be free, madame; be patient a little longer. Have the goodness to leave me alone; I have some affairs to settle before occupying myself with yours."

She felt how much sorrow, humiliation perhaps, was hidden beneath this rude language, hardly polite, and her soul was full of pity for the unfortunate one that she was thus causing to suffer.

"You think me ungrateful?" she said, with such

profound regret in her voice that it was impossible to misinterpret her.

Néoutof looked at her as he would at an imprudent child.

"No. You follow natural law; it is I who am wrong. Go, countess, and leave me with my affairs. I am going to settle yours also."

She withdrew, her heart anxious, with the idea that she ought to have tarried; that she ought to have said something, shown what she felt, instead of hiding her feelings beneath pride. Scarcely had she entered her room than light burst in upon her, and she understood what her husband meant when he affirmed that she would soon be free. With a terrified gesture, she strove to drive away the horrible vision.

"No, no!" she cried; "no blood between us. O God! who punishes me thus cruelly for some unknown fault, I swear to thee that if this man dies for me, never, never will I see Ulric again."

Her mind was so distracted that she could scarcely find the door of her chamber. Feeling that she was no longer mistress of herself, she stopped in the middle of the vast room, light and gay, where the sun shown in in floods.

"I must not lose my reason," she said, with firmness. "I must be in possession of all my powers for what I am going to do."

Without giving way to any fickleness, without allowing her thoughts to wander the least from the calm that she had imposed upon herself, she re-

mained thus, standing, motionless, her whole being stirred by the effort of her will.

A change immediately manifested itself, and she felt that she was restored to her senses.

Then she made the tour of her room slowly, stopping before familiar objects to recognize them, commanding the nervous trembling, constraining herself to think of arithmetical problems, and to solve them rapidly. At the end of a quarter of an hour she seated herself to rest, for her body was worn; but her spirit had regained all its energy, and her judgment its full value.

After this moment of rest, in which she was conscious of having returned from very far, — farther from the living world than she would have thought possible, — the fear that had thus shaken her returned with redoubled strength.

"What if the time had come?" she thought, regarding the dial-case on the wall. She was astonished to see that half an hour had scarcely passed since the moment she entered the general's apartment.

"Such moments of agony!" she exclaimed. "It seems as if I had spent a whole life since the morning."

She rose to the full height of her noble figure, repaired the disorder of her hair, and, after having assured herself with a glance that nothing exterior would betray her inward emotions, she went straight to the cabinet of her husband.

She entered without knocking. Fear had ren-

dered her step so light that she even reached Néoutof without his having remarked her presence. He was seated in a low arm-chair before his bureau, and, in a large, beautiful hand, ancient in style, he was writing upon stamped paper, in coarse lines far apart, the following: —

"I will to my wife Cleopatra, born Bakhtof, the whole of my earthly goods, movable and immovable; having no heirs except some very distant relatives, who, having never concerned themselves about me, I feel I do them no wrong in not concerning myself about them."

Cleopatra placed her beautiful, flexible hand upon the shoulder of her husband.

He started, and looked at her with eyes in which the tears still shone, having been carelessly wiped away.

"My friend," she said, "my benefactor, my father, I suffer all the pain that I have caused you."

"Have you come to talk? I told you I wished to be alone," he said, with impatience.

But he could not, so near his end, deprive himself of her dear presence.

"Be seated," he concluded, speaking quickly.

He seemed to move with difficulty, and she feared that he had already taken poison. Regarding him uneasily, she seated herself in a low chair near him. Never had she felt such tenderness for him as he inspired within her at this moment.

"It is death that you seek," she said, resting calm, though with a prodigious effort; "and I,—I

declare, if you die I will enter a convent that very day."

"Unhappy creature! What do you want of me?" cried Néoutof, throwing down his pen.

"I don't know what I want, if that which I wish is going to cause your death. I know one thing, that I refuse your fortune at any rate, and my liberty at this price."

A strange joy, almost superhuman, seized him at the thought that after all she loved him. He knew that this friendship was nothing in comparison with the love she bore another; but the thought that she would sooner renounce that love than to see him die, warmed his heart.

"Yet, if I die a natural death?" he said, with a sort of smile.

"I would not trust you, now," she said quietly.

He took one of her hands that lay within the folds of her dress and kissed it passionately.

"Cleopatra," he said, "you are a wonderful creature, and I really do not know what you have come into this world for, for you resemble no one. You want me to live, and yet you would cause me to die of grief."

She did not answer, but looked at him with her beautiful eyes moist with tears.

"Yes, I understand perfectly well. If I am not resigned to die of grief, slowly, day by day, it is you who will pass away into that world of dreams from which you came. I am right, am I not? Do

you know what it means — a divorce — that which to you is only a word?

"For me it is ridicule. But that does not disturb me, for I am capable yet of sending a bullet into the breast of any one, no matter who it might be, that should take it upon himself to make fun either of you or me. It is worse than that, Cleopatra; it is solitude, it is desertion. Don't you see what you have made of my life? You have fastened me by a thousand ties that were untied or broken; you have created for me a world alive with interests that I should not know how to face alone. What a figure I should make in the presence of those who come here, that we receive together, who know how attached I am to you! You would be blamed, Cleopatra! I could not bear that. I am an old wild-boar whose shouts have remained famous. I should have as many enemies in eight days as we can count friends at present. It is, then, desertion; it is exile far from the world; my last days given over to the care of hirelings. Why not let me die now? I assure you it would be much easier, and more becoming."

She clung with both hands to the arm of Néoutof's chair, repeating, "It must not be!"

"Woman! woman!" he said, shaking his head, "you are asking for happiness, but you will not accept the means to attain it. Illogical and wilful! What can I say? I neither, I do not wish to yield. Where is that going to lead us?"

She answered nothing, but her head bent upon her hands, that were fastened to his chair.

Néoutof passed his withered hand over the golden hair, almost luminous.

"Spoiled child!" he said, with gentle pity. "you can't wait. You must have, at once, your new toy."

Cleopatra raised her head.

"I swear to you if I did not love with all my soul, with all my being, the one whose wife I wish to become, I would never have inflicted this suffering upon you, or brought this humiliation upon myself."

He looked at her attentively.

"Yes, humiliation it is true, and you so haughty, you who have never bent beneath any yoke. Ah," he said, suddenly, with jealous anger, "I understand how it is that you are so cruel! It is his command, and you will obey him."

"I love him!" cried Cleopatra, with glowing eyes and a defiant air.

"You love him! I can believe it well. You imagine that no human being has ever loved as you do, — that you suffer more than any one else has ever suffered, — child that you are. Come, you did not invent love. It has tortured many others before you were born, and it will cause millions to die ere you will cease to exist."

"That does not hinder one from suffering," said Cleopatra, without changing her attitude.

"Suffer, indeed! and I — do I not suffer?"

"It is not the same thing," she said, with pride.

"How do you know that, mademoiselle? You behave badly at this moment; you tear from an old man the secret of his last sufferings. I love you — I also. Yes, I love you; as fondly, more fondly perhaps, than it is possible for you to love the youth who is preferred by you. General Count Néoutof, veteran of 1812, loves Cleopatra Bakhtof, his wife for five years, and never has he allowed her to hear the word, or even suspect it, because he feared that the passion of an old man would be an insult to her who was its object, and also because it was humiliating to him. That is what I have endured — I! And you were my wife, and belonged to me before God and man. And yet you talk to me of love!"

He shrugged his shoulders with an ample gesture, as if he shook off all the tempests of his life.

"O sir, forgive me!" cried Cleopatra, hiding her face in her hands.

They remained silent for some time, when Néoutof rose and walked with large strides around his cabinet. Then he stopped before her.

"I might have left you in ignorance of this love, this passion, of an old man for you, and God is witness whether it is not equal to your love for that youth; but I cannot be deprived of your society. Your presence in my house is the joy of my life; the rustling of your dress in my room is music; your face, it is the sun. Leave me, then, to die. You see plainly that I am doting."

"No," repeated Cleopatra, with sweet obstinacy. "If you die I shall enter a convent for life."

"Then let us live as we have lived, and speak of it no more. If your heart torments you do as I do, impose silence upon it, and look the world in the face, that no one may suspect that you suffer."

She rose and withdrew without his saying a word to detain her.

For more than an hour Cleopatra repeated over and over the words of this strange interview. Certainly the situation was entangled, and offered no solution. But when one is young there is courage to hope something will happen. What, she did not know; something that would make her husband relent.

She wrote to Ulric: "I have not been able to win anything yet. Patience and courage."

From that same evening her life with her husband passed on as usual. Before their servants, as well as in the presence of strangers, they were the same as ever. Only when alone they did not converse. What could they say now?

CHAPTER XXIII.

ENDURANCE.

DAYS rolled by. Néoutof was sunk in despair, his soul filled with that thirst for death that follows great misfortunes in life. It stung him to be compelled to live, watched so closely by Cleopatra, who would understand neither his misery, nor that death would be a relief to him.

She had great fear that he would commit suicide, and observed him anxiously every instant. He was aware of it, and he chafed still more; but she could not escape from this fear. In the night, in her dreams, she saw the old man agonizing in his chair. She would awake, stifling a shrill cry, and, running, prostrate herself before the images, and there pray for peace.

They always went out together, for she left him alone the least possible. She received no visitors, pleading as excuse the state of her health. And really she looked ill. Her face wore an expression painfully ideal, as seen in those who have but a few days to live. But that which was preying upon her was less her love, less her thoughts of Ulric's sufferings, than the importunity of this horrible vision, and the terror of remorse. Every day they were seen out riding in the little

low barouche, drawn by two ponies. They would traverse the park in the direction of the forest, or drive towards Pavlovsk, according to the fancy of the coachman, who never received any orders for these promenades. Thus they rolled along seated side by side, he, old and shrunk within himself; she, pale and thin, almost transparent, with her deep, beautiful eyes, in which burned the light from an inward flame.

At moments she almost persuaded herself that she did not love Ulric; and she was glad and triumphant with the bitter joy of martyrs. If she loved him no longer there would be no crime, and she could sleep in peace.

Néoutof would not commit suicide. Everything would go well, she would become calm and beautiful, again queen of her worldly kingdom.

Then came the sudden awakening; something — nothing in itself — would throw her into the most profound tenderness, the deepest sadness; into that vibrating, passionate longing for a love that had been foreseen, but never realized; then she would become desperate, seeking to tear her soul from this inexorable flame that was devouring it.

Thus, held between love and terror, she was being consumed, little by little, like the embers of burning incense. She had not seen Ulric again or written to him. Sometimes she hoped that he had left, or was dead. If dead she could love him all the more, for she would be allowed to weep for him.

One evening, about eight o'clock, they found themselves near the Wauxhall at Pavlovsk at the moment when the music began. The first strains woke Cleopatra's attention, and she gave a slight start. Néoutof, quick to understand her every wish, ordered the carriage to stop, and they remained quiet, attentively listening to the sounds that distance rendered more delicate and rippling.

It was the andante of one of Mendelssohn's symphonies, that she specially loved. The violins shed the tears of their sweet melodies, while the violoncellos seemed to be living by their side another existence, independent and peaceful, without heeding in the least the bitter lamentations of their companions. Cleopatra drank in this sadness with something of sweet voluptuousness. In the warmth of the beautiful evening, beneath the leaves that were still young and fresh, a star above her head, this music had something in common with her own tenderness, that lamented so bitterly in the presence of another's existence.

She raised her eyes thoughtfully to look at the tender green over which the hour of this northern spring-time scarcely threw a shadow, when instantly she stood motionless and transfigured, — Ulric was looking at her only a few steps beyond.

She struggled with an ardent impulse for throwing herself into his arms and crying: "Take me away, no matter where!" But she was a woman of the world, and instinctively realized her duties,

even if reason departed. She assumed an undisturbed attitude. Their eyes alone talked.

How foolish she had been to imagine that she no longer loved this man! She belonged to him entirely, absolutely, even to the last hair of her head! To leave with him she would have given all she possessed, all that she was, — all, even her renown, even the esteem of her friends! She did not know if she would have given herself. How could she know, since he had never asked it of her?

They looked on, and exchanged all their sorrows in that look. He said to her, "How you have suffered! how pale you are! how beautiful! and how much I love you!" and she responded, "I adore you, and I am dying in your absence; but I have courage, and I will die bravely."

Suddenly Ulric started, turned about, and, after a few steps, disappeared down the alley. Cleopatra felt a clod of ice fall upon her heart, and looked at her husband. He had observed them, she was sure of it, and it was in meeting his look that Ulric turned away.

"Go on," said Néoutof to the driver. They returned home without exchanging a word. Tea was served; each took a cup in silence, and they separated.

That night Cleopatra enjoyed a delicious dream.

As during their interview she was near to Ulric, but it was forbidden them to approach each other, so an invisible obstacle separated them now. They looked at each other with such intensity, that, little

by little, they became free from earthly bonds. Without losing sight of each other, without power to draw nearer, they rose slowly above the trees and wandered; floating above the earth, but near enough to hear the harmonies that flowed on beneath them. The perfume of the flowers, the softened music of the violins, the spectacle of gardens and forests, were part of themselves. Everything that was good and beautiful in life became their essence. The intoxication of looks penetrated them with joy, while the impossibility to touch even the hand filled them with suffering the most intense, deep, and cruel.

Cleopatra woke, her eyes bathed in light.

"Too bad that one cannot always sleep and dream thus!" thought she. "If death were like that, it would be too good to die!"

All day she was in a half slumber, seeking to evoke again the sensations of this exquisite dream. Néoutof looked at her often and long. He read in her beautiful, emaciated face the secret history of a soul devoured by sorrow. The expression of Ulric's eyes had lingered in the memory of the old man; he recalled a day in his youth when he loved a woman for whose love he was forbidden to hope. The despair of that time in his life, although long ago, had left traces in his mind.

"Indeed people suffer from love, it is true, and it happens that they die!"

Profound pity was stirred in his heart at the

sight of his young wife, dozing, so to speak, in her half dream. He asked himself what right he had to make this exquisite creature suffer thus, whose martyrdom was caused by a delicacy of feeling above everything that was ordinary.

"I am a miserable egotist," he said to himself after long meditation. "She loves my life more than her own; at least she will not load her conscience with remorse, though her liberty might be gained at this cost; and I — I who think I love her more than she is able to realize — I torture her, simply that I may not be deprived of her presence. I do not deserve the pains she is taking about me. And what? — a little bitterness, a little shame, perhaps, is soon conquered — am I a coward in the presence of moral suffering? That is cowardice, like any other. Old age, has it diminished my strength in this respect?"

Twenty times he was upon the point of opening his mouth, but his mouth remained closed. He could not decide with himself to pronounce the word that would open an eternal abyss between him and Cleopatra. He knew it would be the signal for her departure from the house where she was the life, and he recoiled still.

At the same hour as the evening before he ordered his carriage, and they directed their way towards Wauxhall; and, obeying his command, the barouche stopped at the same spot. The music had changed. It was a grand symphony, in which all the storms of passion, at once unchained, thundered

beneath the brass instruments, and throbbed on the cords of the counter-bass.

The piercing eyes of the general perceived, within the foliage of a group of trees, the silhouette of Ulric, cleverly concealed. The young man could not refrain from coming; all day he had hoped; and in the evening he was sure she would come. He had watched the little barouche as it made the tour of the park; he had followed it, and now he beheld his dear idol.

How had she guessed his presence? By what miracle did she know where he was hidden?

Néoutof felt a slight trembling in the lace of her dress that grazed his knees. Not to frighten the lovers, he bowed his head, and appeared to be deeply absorbed in his thoughts.

They regarded each other with sorrow; they drank from each other's eyes with eagerness, these two beings that he had condemned to suffer. Néoutof tasted the bitterness of jealousy, with all its intensity; he drank the cup to its dregs with all the despair of old age, he who expects nothing more in life, for whom each day is a problem. He felt that in all his life he had never loved a woman so tenderly, so profoundly, as the one at his side; and before death, that was certainly approaching him, he said to himself, that if he gave her to this man that she loved, it would be the greatest act of his life. One single jewel was wanting in the crown of this rich, brave, happy man, — renunciation. He felt this palm descending upon his

head from the sky that smiled above him. While the eyes of the poor lovers filled with tears, his old heart, which always beat generously, throbbed with pride and joy at the thought that he could perform one more good deed before leaving this world.

The wild storm of harmony had softened, and the last notes of the orchestra died away in insensible murmur.

"Return," said Néoutof.

A faint sigh escaped Cleopatra, but no word.

"Fast," said the general, with impatience.

The horses trotted rapidly over the gravelled road, and they soon reached their house.

Néoutof alighted with an alacrity that surprised his servants. Cleopatra followed him slowly, like a creature crushed beneath some great loss. She was going to her apartment.

"No, countess; this way, if you please," said the general, signifying his study.

She passed her hat and cloak to the chambermaid, and followed her husband. Néoutof closed the door himself with the freedom of motion not usual with him.

"Countess," said he, "you have asked a great sacrifice of me. I did not feel capable of granting it until this day. To-day I have fathomed my soul. You are free."

She looked at him with an incredulous air. It was impossible! One does not announce such things with a calm, almost joyous face. Her

husband took her hand and led her to the place that she usually occupied near his chair.

"Have you heard? — you are free, my dear child! I have come to see that I am an old coward to recede before a sacrifice which is the merest trifle in comparison with that which you accept in remaining with me. To-morrow you are at liberty to demand a divorce, as you have wished. I shall take the necessary measures, that there may be no difficulty on my side. What! Have you nothing to say?"

Cleopatra inclined her head low, and sank down upon her knees near him; and, as one prays at the bedside of the dying, she wept and prayed for him.

"May Heaven bless you, my father!" she said, while the tears flowed unrestrained and bitter as well as glad. "May Heaven bless you for your goodness, that rescued me long ago; for the happy times I have passed in your house; for your clemency to-day! Forgive me, oh, forgive me, now and at the hour of death, for the trouble I have made you and the shame I have brought upon you."

"Don't let us talk of that," said Néoutof, with a paternal gesture, passing his hand over her golden hair. "You have done so much for me that, if it was not a little difficult for me to give you up, there would be no merit on my part. I should be too much in your credit. Sit down by me, and let us talk."

But she could not listen; she could only weep.

Her soul was melting in tears, and she did not know if it was with joy or grief that she felt her heart so swollen. All his efforts, all the tender words of Néoutof, did not succeed in calming her. She rose and retired to her room and to bed. The thought of Ulric's joy appeared profane to her, and she would not write to him that day. It seemed to her as if she was a widow ; that she had no right to rejoice with the man she loved, since the one whose name she had borne was left sad and alone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NOT SO EASY.

THE next morning the general sent for the most able legal adviser in St. Petersburg, to ascertain what difficulties this divorce might be likely to encounter. The answer was not very encouraging. It was possible, without doubt, to obtain a divorce; but there were conditions required by the law that rendered it annoying to both parties alike.

"No matter," said the general, "I am decided to submit to every discomfort imaginable in order to restore to my wife the liberty that I have too long usurped. Understand me, sir, all the faults are to be heaped on myself. The countess is a most admirable woman, and worthy of the highest esteem. The essential thing is that she comes out of the trial intact, but in which you may make me play the rôle of an ungrateful wretch, if it is necessary."

The lawyer reflected. The case presented to him was certainly very rare. Ordinarily, one of the party complained bitterly of the other; oftener still both were equally dissatisfied. Here the husband seemed to adore his wife, and the countess, when appealed to, spoke in about the same terms of her husband.

The jurisconsult might have exclaimed with Basile: "Whom are they trying to deceive?" But a little reflection caused him to guess a part of the drama at least that was to unfold itself before the Saint-Synode. The general granted his wife her liberty that she might enter into another marriage, and no one was ever to suspect the depth of his devotion.

Marriage in Russia is purely a religious institution. It is the Saint-Synode that judges divorce cases, — an occurrence that is very rare.

The emperor was the chief of this religious tribunal; therefore it was essential to appeal to him first, to obtain his approbation. Néoutof wrote his petition in terms that were required, and then added with his own brave hand a letter, in which he implored particularly the clemency of his sovereign, acknowledging his error in having chained to his existence a person as charming as the countess, but explaining that he had counted upon a shorter life, and for her to have gained her liberty sooner.

There are no secrets at court. The news of this demand for a divorce filtered through the walls so rapidly that everybody was informed of it within twenty-four hours after it was deposited in the imperial hands.

There was only one cry. Never did a pack of well-trained hounds bark in more perfect time at an unfortunate stag that they were chasing. As much as the Néoutof couple had been considered

worthy of admiration the evening before, they were to-day only fit to be dragged to the gibbet. Néoutof was an old, foolish egotist, who had married at the age when honest people, without direct heirs, make their will in favor of some religious community, and then die within a suitable space of time! Cleopatra was an ambitious girl, who had married for money, and at present was repenting her folly. Very little that was interesting about such people!

The little Princess Charamirof was then heard to speak with excessive zeal in behalf of the good cause. No family bonds would ever hinder her from judging actions in conformity with truth. Besides, she had always said Cleopatra would repent some day, having preferred fortune to happiness. It was correct; — she had always said it. Only she forgot to add in what this despised happiness consisted; and no one remembered to-day that this inestimable blessing for Cleopatra was to live a poor dependent, with her sister, a millionnaire.

Soon a new horror was added to those that public charity was heaping upon the couple desirous of separation. They had asked for divorce, and yet continued to live together. Nothing like it had ever been heard of before. When people get divorced was it not because they hated each other? What would be thought of people who wished to part and yet were not able to quit each other?

That was true. In defiance of custom, and in

waiting till the emperor made it known whether he authorized or not the countess to present her claim, Néoutof had begged Cleopatra to remain in his house.

"If we obtain the permission to part," he said, "there will be time enough for you to retire to a convent; if it is refused us, what use is there of leaving my house where you would come back; — for you would return here, Cleopatra? Would you have the courage to live anywhere else than near your old friend, with whom, at least, you might weep?"

He introduced into his conversations and into his actions such warmth of soul, such generosity, that his wife felt more and more saddened. To accept her liberty from hands prodigal with blessings seemed to her to be abusing his goodness. He loaded her with presents and attentions, and, when she would resist, "Allow me to do it," he would say, "so long as I have the right, and allow me to thank you that you have made me so happy."

There was nothing assumed in that. Néoutof had a lofty soul, that did not recoil before the consequences of his decisions. He had sacrificed all he had on earth to the affection he entertained for Cleopatra. In this great act of heroism he felt neither fatigue nor sorrow, — like a traveller who climbs a mountain, and thinks no more — beholding the top — of the stones that have torn his feet, or of thirst or weariness.

Ulric had been warned by a short note. Néoutof had insisted that Cleopatra should let him know the result of her endeavors. The young man had replied, and a daily correspondence was established, ardent and mystical on the part of the Swede, constrained and timid on the part of Cleopatra.

He saw in her his predestined wife. Their happiness, to be reached through so many obstacles, did not appear to him doubtful. He said to her that their souls had been united from all eternity, and nothing could hinder their belonging to each other.

She did not know what to reply. The joy that she might have felt could not expand itself freely beneath the roof of the man whose name she still bore. She felt that she should not be really herself until she left it; but her whole being ached, like a wound violently torn open, when she thought of the day when she should leave him alone.

The cause of the delay was the absolute dissatisfaction of the empress, who was decided that to sanction this divorce would be to encourage the venality of marriages. The pure soul of the empress admitted no compromise with passion. Cleopatra had chosen her lot; let her keep it.

Sentence was thus pronounced. Cleopatra was informed of it, and her discouragement was very deep. Her strength, that had seemed to revive after the decision of Néoutof, vanished now with great rapidity. In truth, she was sustained by

nothing, and she was being consumed, living upon herself. Ulric's letters, burning as kisses, troubled instead of reassuring her. That which alone might have restored her was the presence of the one she loved.

Swept away in a whirlwind of living passion, she might have forgotten the rest of the world. Alone with his letters and her anxiety she could neither think nor sleep.

"The countess must go and see the empress herself," said their counsellor to her one day. "Nothing like seeing her. Her Majesty will be touched."

Cleopatra obeyed and sought an audience, which, contrary to her expectations, was accorded her without delay.

She presented herself in a strange state of mind, and with resignation like that of an animal, — as if, expecting nothing good in this world, she feared nothing.

The empress received her with such cold severity that, from the first words, Cleopatra understood. She had not been admitted except to hear the hard truth.

"I warned you to expect no help except from yourself. In defiance of my counsel you persisted in a marriage that religion and reason alike disapproved. May your fault fall upon your own head!"

Cleopatra bowed with respect and retired; but no tear rose to her dry eyes. Of what consequence

to her was blame, no matter the height from which it fell? The remarks of old friends, of rejected admirers, of jealousy, of envy, of idlers, male and female, had reached her in a hundred ways, direct and indirect; public opinion had exiled her; she troubled herself no more about public opinion.

But, if the empress was unyielding, divorce would become impossible. What might be the result to Ulric? She had just entered her coupé — since the first announcement of the divorce she never went out, except in a closed carriage — when she saw d'Alsen, who was sauntering along the fence of the park, his head bowed, and plunged in the blackest melancholy. She touched a spring, and the coupé stopped before the young man. Without a moment's reflection he was seated by Cleopatra, and the two fine trotters bore them away into the woods, which is an extension of the park.

Without exchanging a word they clasped each other's hands as before, — how long it had been! — and with eyes closed they followed the delicious vision of days that had passed. All seemed to be ended; all was melting in the pure, warm atmosphere. They feared nothing more; the empress was not angry; nothing was of consequence: they were together!

"Ah, darling!" said d'Alsen, when they were far enough away to fear no encounter, "I thought I should die to see you no more. Is it

possible to be at the same time so happy and so unhappy?"

She smiled, her eyes closed, pressing her hand more closely within his. This hand that held her, it was her strength and life. She felt her courage revive, as if he had transfused his generous blood into her body.

"But you will be mine?" he said, enveloping her with his passionate look.

"Yes," replied she, as if in a dream.

"When shall we have the divorce?"

"I don't know."

He made a brisk movement that freed his hand. She regained it at once. If she did not touch it she felt herself fainting away.

"What! not obtain the divorce!" cried d'Alsen. "It would be a crime to refuse it to you. Your marriage was such a sin in the sight of God that the first duty of those who have the power is to free you. Adored one! you have never committed but one fault; but it weighs heavily upon you. You will not be delivered of it until the day when you can obey the voice of God and nature."

He became exalted in talking. All the religious fervor of his early education, and his unhappy love boiled up within him, — strange mixture of mysticism and passion.

Cleopatra scarcely listened to him. He was there, that was enough. If he had always been there she would have had more courage; she would have

seen only him. Absent she had no resource. Pride, that so long had upheld her, was wanting now. She was lost in a world of thoughts and new impressions, where all was sad, where nothing brought that ray of light without which man could not live.

"Don't scold me," she said, humbly; "you know well that I have done all I can."

He softened at once.

"What does the empress say?" he asked; "you have been to see her?"

The poor countess sighed at the thought of what she had just endured.

"She will not grant it," she said, with regret.

D'Alsen expressed a movement of impatience.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

He seized her ardently in his arms.

"But you shall be my wife. Embrace my religion, and you will obtain what they refuse you here."

Cleopatra shook her head.

"Your religion would not wish me to be an unfaithful wife; and, then, what shame! You who said you wished to take me away as pure, as respected as I was then— Since, how many stains upon my white robe! And yet, I am the same as then."

D'Alsen bowed his head between his two hands. "It is my fault," he said, with profound bitterness. "Up to the day when I came into your life you

were happy. You were living in sin, but your soul was ignorant of the fault. When I opened your eyes, all the sorrows of life entered into you with that light. O Cleopatra! would it not have been better if we never had met?"

She clung to him. "Don't say that; now I have but you."

They clasped each other with all the rage of despair. The coachman was returning home with them. They were to part without knowing when they should see each other again.

"At least, it is good that we met," said Cleopatra, with a sad smile.

"When shall we meet again?"

"God only knows."

"What are you going to do?"

"Ask advice of the general."

Ulric ground his teeth.

"I hate him!" said he.

Cleopatra rose to the dignity of her old days. "I have the deepest veneration for him," said she. "That man is a hero, and you should not speak of him except with respect and gratitude."

"He takes you from me."

"Ah! you do not know; to the contrary, it is he that gives me to you. Ulric, if you love me, never speak to me of the count except to favor him."

"Then I will not speak of him at all," he said, with a sombre air.

They were a few hundred yards from the house. She took his hand, careless of being seen. "Don't let us part thus," she said. "Remember that I have only the thought of you to help me in this battle. It is cruel, I assure you. Ulric, be good to me."

He looked at her with his black eyes overflowing with passion.

"I adore you!" replied he; "I live only for you. What a ridiculous rôle I am playing here! I have asked leave to return for reasons of health, and I have stayed without any reasons at all. They do not know it is for you I am here. I fear they may guess it."

Cleopatra made a resigned gesture.

"Perhaps that would be for the best," she said; "fear of scandal might force some hands that are at present closed."

"Yes; but you? What would you not suffer — you so proud?"

"I have suffered so much," she said with indifference, "a little more — or a little less. If that would serve anything — Here is the house — Good-by, my love!"

"Good-by, my life!"

The coupé stopped. Ulric got out and offered his hand to the countess.

"*Au revoir, madame*," said he, bowing.

"*Adieu, monsieur*."

She entered the house, and he, gloomy, walked down the avenue to return to his apartments.

Cleopatra went directly to her husband.

"The empress has detained you a long time!" said Néoutof. "What news?"

"Bad. But I have seen Ulric d'Alsen."

She was transfigured. The old man looked at her with compassion.

"What a marvellous thing is love!" said he. "To see you like this every day I would surrender my last sentiment of pride. But that doesn't make things go. The empress?"

"Wishes to hear nothing about it."

Néoutof took a few steps up and down his cabinet.

"It grows serious," said he. "They used to pretend that I was the most stubborn man in the army; it is very possible for me yet to become the most stubborn man in all Russia. We must consult. We will act after."

The lawyer was called; he began to interest himself also in this singular divorce, that was so mysterious up to the present time.

"Is there not some one who has influence with the sovereign, some one who has a particular friendship for you?" he asked, after reflecting.

"No," said Cleopatra, in an absent manner.

Néoutof had raised his head.

"Yes," said he. "The Grand Duke Boris."

Cleopatra started. It was too cruel to have to supplicate him to intercede for her. Néoutof read something of her thoughts in her face, for he said: —

"I will go."

The next day he wrote to his illustrious friend, praying him to receive him. The response was that he was always welcome.

The grand duke occupied at that moment his Palace of the Islands; it was quite a journey for the general. For three or four days he sought to attempt it, but he was obliged to renounce it. His swollen legs refused to carry him.

"It must be you, my child," said he to Cleopatra. "I would have saved you that, but you see it was not my fault." She dropped her head; another sip at the bitter cup, since it was to be so.

The following day she took the train for St. Petersburg, where the general had sent his coupé the evening before to spare her the necessity of using a strange carriage.

During the journey her soul was full of painful thoughts. Not that she blushed at present to ask the man that she once had thought she loved to aid her to marry another — she was far beyond that. But she was happy the last time she had seen this friend at the Champ-de-Mars. It was hardly an hour before the interview that had decided her life. How long ago it seemed! All that happy past was hidden in a thick fog; no future existed; the present alone persecuted her under a million cruel forms. She had not seen Ulric again, and the torture of his absence had become frightfully intense. She felt that if she was not to see him any more she should pine away till death.

CHAPTER XXV.

BORIS'S FRIENDSHIP.

HAVING arrived at the Palace of the Islands she asked that Countess Néoutof be announced. Introduced at once into the study of the grand duke, she saw him coming towards her, his hand extended, and a vivid expression of surprise on his countenance. He had surmised the cause of this proceeding, but had never imagined that she would come herself.

"You, madame! I dared not hope for this honor."

She seated herself in the chair he offered her and looked into his face.

"Do you know why I have come, my lord?" she asked.

Her pride returned in this atmosphere, similar to that of his old existence.

"I would like to hear from you," he said.

Without manifesting it in any visible way he scrutinized her with curiosity.

It was no longer the woman he had once known. It was another being, transfigured, as well as disfigured, by the flame that consumed her.

"It is this," she said, simply: "I was happy with my husband, General Néoutof. You con-

tributed to make me accept this marriage, my lord."

"I?"

Their eyes met. It was not she that turned away. In that deep blue look he beheld again something that had left with him honorable, tender memories.

"Yes, my lord. The kindness of your Imperial Highness had great influence in my decision to marry your friend."

"I recall it," said Boris, with a voice imperceptibly moved. "Go on, madame."

"I was happy with the general, who is the most delicate, noble, and best of men. Suddenly I met a man who, without the participation of my own will, has become the master of my life."

"You love him?" demanded Boris, with a slight tug at the heart.

"I am dying of love," replied she, quietly.

"His name?"

"Ulric d'Alsen, military attaché to the Swedish Embassy. He has resigned his position."

"Ah, *he!*"

Boris recalled the imposing presence, the noble figure, of the young Swede.

"Yes, my lord, *he*," replied Cleopatra, imitating the accent, slightly disdainful, of the grand duke.

"And you wish to marry him?"

"We wish to be married."

Perfect silence reigned in the vast apartment, hung with dark tapestries.

Boris lifted his eyes to the countess.

"You run a great risk," said he. "If you obtain what you seek, it is for you disgrace, exile, and, probably, poverty; for this young man has only a small fortune."

"Very little, my lord. It is, in effect, exile and poverty."

"It would be difficult for you to get used to this."

A smile of old stole over Cleopatra's countenance.

"I have been poor all my life except the five years that I have passed with the title of Countess Néoutof. Decent poverty is an old friend. We shall be very comfortable at meeting again."

Boris could not refrain a look of profound respect. Cleopatra was truly of a superior nature.

"But — the disgrace," said he.

Another smile from the happy days wandered over the face of the young wife.

"My disgrace is already complete," replied she, with fine sarcasm, "and I shall never rise above it. Alone the friendship that your Imperial Highness once manifested for me has perhaps survived this shipwreck."

"Assuredly," replied Boris, with sincerity.

He was angry with himself for having experienced a selfish emotion a moment before.

"Then I shall submit to my fate, consoling

myself with what life will leave to me," concluded Cleopatra.

Boris remained silent. Hers was a broken life; but love was sufficient to grow another life from the ruins.

"Tell me, countess," he began again; "talk with me as to an old friend. I know they cast stones at you; they do not know the name of the one whom you have honored, for I was ignorant of it; but they know there is some one. The harm that your reputation has suffered is, I fear, irreparable. Why did you not patiently wait until God called Néoutof hence?"

"Look at me, my lord!" said the countess, with a stifled voice; "do you not see that between love and duty I am dying? Can I suffer the protraction of this torment? There are women who make an ill-proportioned reckoning between their vows and their fancies, and who can live peacefully in treason. I am not of those — I have never betrayed any one — but my life is leaving me."

Boris bowed before Cleopatra, took her hand and kissed it respectfully.

"My lord," continued she, "in sending me the Gospel you taught me a great lesson. It is not from those in high places that one generally learns principles of humility and virtue, but upon that book in which your name promises me eternal friendship, I vowed to be a faithful wife to my husband, and never use any intrigues or falsehoods

towards him; it is why I am here to-day to pray your aid to release me from this oath of fidelity."

"Then you love him well, this happy d'Alsen?" demanded Boris, with a twinge of sad jealousy.

"I don't know how others love; but if they delay to restore me my liberty, it will be too late, believe me, my lord."

"I will do my best," said Boris, looking her honestly in the face. "I promise you to do all that is possible to persuade the empress — all that is possible."

He insisted, feeling in truth that this woman's strength was being exhausted. He wished her to carry away a good impression of him, the assurance that he was a true friend. She rose.

"Adieu, my lord!" she said; "you have always been very good to me. My heart is grateful, be assured of it."

He recalled at this moment what he had once feared, that she would some day scoff at his behavior towards her. He was ashamed for ever having thought such a thing possible, it was so contrary to the conduct he saw in her now. Willingly he would have asked her pardon. Their eyes met, and each read the thought that occupied the other.

"You deserved to be happy," said Boris, employing unintentionally the past, for Cleopatra appeared to him to belong so little to the living world.

She was silent for a moment, then smiled faintly. "I had made for myself an artificial

ideal of existence; reality is avenged. Adieu, my lord!"

He conducted her to the door; then, from his window, he watched her enter her carriage.

"Yes," thought he, "she deserved happiness, and I — who knows? — I have perhaps missed it."

CHAPTER XXVI.

WAITING.

WITHIN less than eight days General Néoutof was informed that his wife might enter a suit for divorce; that the emperor would offer no further opposition. The grand duke had kept his promise: he had done his best. That which no one knew, however, or would know, was, that he had stirred the pity of the empress, in affirming that it was doubtful if Cleopatra should live long enough to enjoy the liberty so dearly bought.

"If she is to die," said the empress, "may God forgive her. It is not for us mortals to judge her."

The day that Néoutof received this news was one of the most beautiful days of summer. The lindens filled the air with their perfume, as the morning long ago, when beneath their shade Cleopatra met the grand duke. The old man held the letter some time in his hand; the red stamp that had closed it was the seal to his destiny, broken as he was himself. It was at once and the same time the ruin of his household, and the dawn of a happy life for Cleopatra; at least, he believed it. Living with her, seeing her every day, he had not remarked the gradual change which had

transformed this imposing beauty into a shadow almost aerial. She never complained; always ready at his call to read to him, to give him some music, — how could he have noticed that the voice was becoming feeble, fingers soon wearied, and that the figure, always noble and gracious, drooped and sank down into the chair with the air of a broken lily?

It was done, and they must part; the proprieties of life and the law enacted that henceforth she should dwell under another roof. He rang, and gave orders to ask the countess to come to him; a few moments after she entered the cabinet of the general.

"My child," he said, — he had never called her by any other name since he had given consent to the divorce, — "my child, I have interesting news for you. The emperor consents to the divorce."

She stretched her thin hands towards the general's chair, and placed them upon the arm of carved oak. She loved this gesture that approached her benefactor, without real contact.

"You are contented?" he said, with a smile in which was mingled the slightest sarcasm.

"Yes and no," replied she. "I am going to leave you, and I should have loved to remain with you to the last day."

"Thanks," murmured Néoutof.

After a silence he began.

"Where shall you go? You must leave this house as soon as possible."

"To the convent for the daughters of the nobility at St. Petersburg," responded she.

"That is a good idea," approved the general. "You will be near your affairs. When will you set out?"

"When must I?"

"To-day, if you can. The law exacts a delay of two years; but I think it will be shortened for you."

She shuddered, regarding him with agony.

"Oh, two years! it is impossible," she said, slowly.

He looked at her, surprised at this accent of despair, and the truth suddenly flashed over him.

"You are suffering?" he said, with strange emotion, awkward, and, at the same time, full of goodness.

She smiled and reached him her hand with a gesture of filial tenderness.

"I *have* suffered," responded she; "*now* I am happy."

He continued to look at her; his eyes were opened now.

She seemed so feeble that he was frightened.

"What can I do for you?" demanded he, with a full heart. "My house, my fortune, and myself are at your disposition. Is there anything that you desire?"

"Nothing," replied she, "nothing at this moment. When I leave I shall ask for something."

"Then, my dear child, prepare yourself. I seem

to send you away, but it is for your interest, I can assure you."

She rose. He could not rise to lead her, such was his agony. Upon the threshold she turned and sent him the delicious smile of a woman that is loved and would be regretted.

"Siren!" thought he, as she disappeared; "adorable apparition! I have had more happiness than I deserved. Come, courage! I must now pay for that. Let us be honest."

The breakfast reunited them, and, by common accord, they sought to lengthen it beyond the ordinary time. Never had they had so many things to say, so many delicate thoughts to exchange. If either of them entertained any bitterness, each endeavored to hide it, that nothing should poison these last hours, which remembrance they were to keep spotless.

Cleopatra had sent a telegram to Ulric, to warn him that she should leave Tsarskoé-Sélo on the four o'clock train. Another telegram had informed the prioress of the convent of Filles-Nobles. The prioress was a relative of Néoutof, and he had urgently requested, for the love of him, that she would receive the wounded dove that he sent to her.

After the breakfast, the last arrangements detained her about an hour in her room. She carried away only a few things: some linen, a black dress, with a long train, to wear to the Chapel, where she would accompany the sisters at prayers. She appeared, finally, ready for the jour-

ney; a hat of black lace rested upon her golden hair, a black dress outlined beautifully her noble figure; she looked very ill, and yet an appearance of ideal youth floated about her.

She entered the apartment of the one that was no more to be her husband, bearing a casket so heavy that she bent beneath its weight. She put her load upon the table before him.

"What is that?" demanded he, in a severe tone. He recognized very well, however, this casket. It contained the marriage gifts that he had sent her five years ago.

She opened it. All the family jewels that she had worn at her wedding were there, carefully arranged: sapphires, pearls, diamonds, aigrettes, necklaces, rivières, and clasps, — everything was in its place, upon the deep blue velvet of the labelled compartments.

"These are your family diamonds," said Cleopatra. "I have retained the engagement ring, because you bought it at Nicholls & Plincke's."

"I gave them to you. Néoutof does not take back that which he has given," replied the general, severely, pushing away the casket.

"And I," said Cleopatra, with queenly dignity, "I cannot accept that which I ought to return to your family."

"Or to the churches!" interrupted the general.

"To the churches, if you will; it is indifferent to me. No, my friend, I take away with me your

engagement diamond and your unspeakable goodness."

Néoutof regarded the ring that sparkled upon the finger of the young woman, and then his regard plunged into the casket; in the middle of the brilliants, the place of honor was reserved for a simple gold ring, the wedding ring.

He withdrew his with difficulty from his knotty fingers, and placed it near the other.

"Let them sleep together," said he; "all that will go to enrich some sanctuary. It is you who have wished it, madame; but you think, without doubt, that one cannot pay too much for happiness."

"Happiness!" repeated Cleopatra, with sadness. Tears were ready to roll down her cheeks. It was by force of will that she restrained them.

"I told you that I had something to ask of you," she said.

"Ah, yes; it is true,—well?" said the general, with emotion.

"Give me your blessing, my father," she said, "for I have sinned against heaven and against you." She knelt before him.

"My daughter," prayed Néoutof, with a stifled voice, "may God be with you and keep you from harm! In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen!"

He made the sign of the cross upon the beautiful brow raised towards him; he took her in his arms and clasped her in a long embrace. "May God re-

ward you, my child," he said, "for the joy you have brought to this house. You take it away; may you bear it elsewhere, greater and more complete." The effort was beyond the support of human nature. She saw him grow pale and fall backwards.

"It is nothing," he murmured with pain; "it is nothing."

She was standing before him, anxious. With a gesture he bid her go. "I am better, my child. Fear nothing. I will not cause you the sorrow of my death. You do not deserve that! Go, my child! Peace upon you!"

She departed, and for a long time he watched the door through which she had passed, seeming at moments to catch a glimpse of her sunshine and grace.

His solitary dinner was served in his arm-chair, and the day departed; the twilight stole into the silent room where the diamonds threw out at intervals their mysterious flashes; then came night. Néoutof had refused lamps, and very late he sat motionless and mute, his eyes fixed upon the obscure door, which Cleopatra would never pass again.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CONVENT.

THE convent is not dark and deep like a gothic cloister, but it has blank whitewashed walls pierced with windows like a factory; the cells are light and neat; to speak correctly, they are rooms where each one has brought pieces of furniture that are dear to her. The great wide corridors, well lighted, resemble the institutions for girls; nothing lugubrious or ascetic; in one word, that kind of sanctification for the use of people well born.

Only from the window of Cleopatra's cell were to be seen the pompous monuments of a cemetery, where burying is at a premium. It is a matter of great consideration to be buried at Dievitchi; the prayers are good here; better it appears than anywhere else, except at the monastery of St.-Alexander-Nevsky. Unhappily for the last place, it has no more attainable ground, but it is rich enough to be contented with its present endowments.

Cleopatra was soon accustomed to this pious and orderly life which lulled her sad thoughts. She was full of hope now. All necessary formalities were regularly fulfilled. She was informed of her affairs through the visits of her

lawyer, and by letters from Néoutof, who often wrote her a few lines in the fine large hand of an old man.

And, then, she received letters from Ulric. They were effusions overflowing with ecstasy. Anticipating his future happiness, he saw her already near him on the shores of the Swedish lakes, in the midst of those fantastic landscapes that look like fairy scenery. It was there that he would carry her as soon as marriage gave her to him, and it was there that they would forget all their pains. It was cruel not to be allowed to see her; but all tears would be wiped away on the blessed shores of the Léthé.

He was full of joy and strength, now that he was sure to obtain her. She was growing weaker every hour, since she could not be allowed to see him. She had never been loved, or so little. She had understood too late the real tenderness of Néoutof, and the day that love took possession of her it seemed as if it vowed to pay her all the arrears of her life. She had believed in this promise, and then nothing — nothing except her own emotions, ardent, sorrowful, the longing never answered.

She went to church with the sisters, and one or two old ladies who had dwelt there for some time. They treated her politely, without extending to her much sympathy. A divorced woman, or one upon the point of being, was almost an object of scandal among the pious girls who had retired from the

world for the very purpose of knowing and censuring all that was going on there.

She would have liked to see a dog, for the sake of looking in its eyes and saying, "Do you love me?"

But dogs don't enter the convents. Cats are tolerated there under the pretence that they chase away the mice. Cleopatra felt herself incapable of soliciting any tenderness from a cat. She passed her hand over their backs when they came and rubbed against her, and that was all.

About the middle of August — near the time of her marriage — a pompous funeral was celebrated at Diévitchi, for a young man belonging to a high family. Hidden beneath a black veil, Cleopatra was in the chapel during the funeral ceremonies, for everything furnished distraction for her in the monotony of these days that resembled each other so closely. No one present had observed her, for every one was ignorant of her presence. Alone, the Grand Duke Boris, who had been godfather to the young deceased, searched beneath the gauze veils, and recognized her that had been the fair Cleopatra.

Was it she? He suddenly saw her in his mind as he had met her near the old tower, in the park. The apparition of this triumphant beauty, flushed with emotion, rose up before him with extraordinary intensity. He forgot the funeral choirs, the mourning family, the catafalque loaded with silver embroideries; he saw nothing but Cleopatra dressed in a light,

summer toilet, shaded beneath a rose-lined parasol, the reflection from which lent greater brilliancy to her pearly complexion; he saw the greyhound that passed its head beneath the beautiful hand; he saw the smile and the blush and the paleness that followed. He had really loved her, it was true, a single moment, perhaps; but he had loved her, for he was not able now to restrain himself from tears at seeing her thus veiled in black, drooping against a pillar. And the family, attentive to the slightest movement of the grand duke, said to themselves, on seeing him wipe away a tear with the extremity of his white glove: —

"How he loved his godson!"

After the ceremony, which had seemed very long to Boris, when the last chorus and the last prayer had scattered the audience, he paid a visit to the prioress, whom he had formerly known as maid-of-honor when he was a small boy. She had entered the cloister for some secret love-affair, and when he learned her history he respected her for having had the courage and the dignity to keep silent.

"It is not only on your account that I came to-day, mother," he said, entering the parlor, which, in reality, was a salon. "I would like to see Countess Néoutof; she appears to me very much changed."

The prioress was hard towards others who suffered, maintaining that every one was able to rise above trouble by the help of prayer, since that means had succeeded with her.

"She feels lonely here, I think," replied the sister; "your Imperial Highness can judge for himself; I will have her summoned."

Soon after Cleopatra entered. The prioress understood that she ought to retire, and they remained, alone, standing before each other.

"Madame," said Boris, "I wished to see you."

She smiled. Her smile had the same heavenly grace as of old.

"I come to ask if I can serve you in any way."

"I have not thanked your Imperial Highness," said Cleopatra, with an exquisite voice, velvety and deep; "it is to you that I owe my liberty. I have not thanked you, because words fail to explain my thoughts. My heart does not know how to express what it feels."

He made a negative gesture, as if to refuse any mention of her gratitude.

"And, now, what can I do more?"

The countenance of the countess wore an anxious expression.

"The proceedings are very slow, my lord," said she; "it appears they are going to last a year."

"A year!" cried the grand duke, involuntarily.

"Yes; I don't know what is the matter with me; perhaps it is the want of air and exercise, or else it is the discipline, — I don't know. They are very good to me, but I can't accustom myself — and yet I can't go out until — until the divorce is pronounced. If it was possible to hurry a little"—

"A year!" said Boris to himself, looking at her. "If she stays here a month, she will die."

Instantly the anxious, deferential expression painted upon Cleopatra's face disappeared; her eyes grew deep, and she placed her burning fingers upon the hand of the grand duke.

"If you have ever had any affection for me, my lord," she said with a low voice, with a look that caused Boris to start, "tell them to hasten — for I am dying."

"Happiness"— he began, to calm her.

She stopped him with a resolute gesture.

"I told you this six weeks ago; I repeat it to-day; I am dying; let them hasten, if they wish me to leave here alive."

She withdrew a few steps.

"You will live long," said Boris, with that affectionate kindness that made him so irresistible when he wished to please. "You will live many years; but it is no reason why you should lose one year at present. I shall go and exert myself in your behalf."

"May God return you this goodness, my lord! The general and you, — you have been my true friends."

She did not speak of Ulric. Boris was struck with that, but it was not for him to allude to it.

"Au revoir!" he said, with a hopeful tone.

"Adieu, my lord," responded she. "We shall not see each other again in this world; for I shall

only leave here to be married, and shall leave St. Petersburg the same day."

"Adieu, then," said he, regarding her deeply. "I shall never forget your eyes, nor your smile. You are not of those that one forgets, madame. Be happy."

He withdrew.

Eight days later the divorce was pronounced. All the formalities had vanished like a dream. Cleopatra was free to marry Ulric the following day.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HAPPY.

IT was a modest, almost a poor wedding. Dressed in gray silk, as a widow, Cleopatra repaired to the Swedish church at an early hour in the morning, where the pastor delivered a very concise discourse. What could one say to a woman so recently divorced, which would not make some allusion to her first marriage?

At the Russian church there was no discourse at all. Three or four of Ulric's friends alone assisted at the ceremony. Irene, invited, had refused. Indeed, she had explained her absence in a very impertinent letter, in which she hoped her sister "would have the good sense never to set foot in St. Petersburg again. You have caused scandal enough here, I think," she said in concluding, "so that the place might be disagreeable; but if you are wanting in judgment sufficient to understand it, I will warn you in advance that my house will be rigorously closed against you."

Less strenuous, as regards rules of decorum, Charamirof sent a jewel casket and a pleasant little letter to his sister-in-law, wishing all the happiness possible.

After the double ceremony, the married pair

returned to apartments in a hotel. Ulric had ordered the salon to be decorated with green plants for the occasion; but the furniture had that stiff air which characterizes all places which are only transiently occupied. But what did it matter? They were to set out in the afternoon for a house in the country which a friend of Ulric had placed at their disposal. It was upon the frontier of Finland, their first station for rest on their way to Sweden.

That which first struck Cleopatra upon entering this commonplace room was an immense basket of maiden flowers, — white roses, tuberoses, and orange blossoms woven in profusion, like the nosegay she received the morning of her first marriage.

Her eyes filled with tears, for she recognized Néoutof's message. What more delicate attention could certify to his vigilant friendship? As she bent over the flowers she perceived that they formed a net-work above some square object which rested on the bottom of the basket; she removed them and beheld an image of the Holy Virgin exquisitely set in gold and precious stones. A thread of pearls of incomparable beauty closed the frame.

"Ah!" thought Cleopatra, "he has found a way to force me to accept them."

They were the family jewels with which Néoutof had arrayed his wedding gift. One could not refuse a holy image. Cleopatra would accept the diamonds offered in this fashion.

"What does that mean?" demanded Ulric, knitting his brow.

"It is General Néoutof, who wishes me happiness," responded Cleopatra, reading a card on which, in effect, were written these simple words.

She selected several flowers among the most beautiful, tied them with a ribbon, and sent them at once to the general. That was all.

In this hired apartment they could say nothing, so they hastened to leave it.

Their travelling carriage stood before the door; they mounted, and were soon on the road to Finland.

It was the first time they had seen each other since their long separation. The marriage ceremonies had produced the strange effect of rendering them greater strangers. Having come from different ways to the church, feeling the eyes of the curious upon them, the indiscreet eyes of some gossips that had come "to see," they suffered the consciousness of having accomplished an act in public that in some particulars had been unseemly, and for which closed doors would have been preferable.

Now, rocked by the cadenced motion of the berlin, the old impressions were soon restored to them. The sky was blue; the melancholy gayety of a beautiful autumn day, for September had already commenced, shone in the amber foliage already growing thin, and in the flowers of the gardens, radiant, but odorless.

The fragrance of the tuberoses followed them meantime, for Cleopatra would have the flowers taken with her. The precious image enclosed within her frame was in the front of the carriage. Thus, surrounded by sweet and salutary impressions, the young wife gave herself up to be influenced by the reality of her happiness.

"At last," said Ulric, folding her in his arms, "at last you are mine; we are now one in life, and we can love each other without sin. We shall be very happy, Cleopatra, for we have suffered greatly."

"Yes, we will be happy," murmured she. "Talk to me; say tender things to me. It seems as if my soul had been frozen for a very long time, and your words melt it, — melt it slowly. Do you recall, darling, the ice in the Néva?"

"I adore you," said Ulric, looking at her as he did the day of the review.

"Again! again!" she said, pressing nearer to him. "Tell me that you love me."

He kissed her hair softly, her brow, and her closed eyes.

"No, don't kiss me," said she; "it hurts me. Talk to me, to get me accustomed to your words."

He did not dare tell her how changed she was, but he was sure, with the confidence of youth, that he would see her bloom again, now that she was to be near him. He talked to her softly, as she had asked him, holding her near to him, for she appeared to suffer if he loosened his embrace.

Night fell early, wrapping the picturesque landscape in a luminous vapor. The moon had arisen with the setting of the sun, and all was light and silvery, as in a dream.

After climbing a fatiguing height, the horses stopped before the door of an ancient chateau, constructed of Finland granite, in an original style of architecture, a little heavy and severe, but of grand effect.

"See! here is our house," said Ulric; "at least, as long as it pleases you to remain here."

They entered a great hall, poorly lighted, — for it would have taken a dozen torches to illuminate it, — and then passed into the dining-room, comfortably furnished, where a good supper was soon served for them. Ulric's friend had not been neglectful in seeking to make their abode agreeable.

Cleopatra only tasted a little of the fruit; she was so weary that all food was offensive to her; but, seated opposite her husband, she smiled in his face, with the enraptured smile of a child that finds everything new and amusing.

Having finished their supper, they passed into a little salon adjoining their room. The moon, that was now full, floated in the clear sky and threw in floods of dazzling light through the great bays that served as windows.

The flowers brought from St. Petersburg, already disposed in vases, filled the air with their perfume.

"Please put out the candles," said Cleopatra;

"it is so beautiful, this moon — and what a view!"

She sat upon a small sofa in the recess of the windows, to enjoy to the utmost the spectacle that was offered her.

It was a severe landscape of rocks and fir-trees, with a roaring torrent rushing down the valley. They could see the foam from the falls sparkling in the rays of the moon. The window was closed so as to prevent the night-air from entering, and thus the room was warm as an evening in spring-time.

"Ah!" said Cleopatra, with a happy voice, "I am so tired! I can do nothing more. It seems to me I cannot move my hand even. But I am happy, happy! It is so beautiful here! We are going to be as happy as in the fairy stories. And then, what gives me the greatest pleasure, I am at peace with everybody."

Ulric had seated himself by her, and she leaned her head back upon his shoulder. It was her place of refuge, and she was at rest only when there.

"Yes," she said, taking the hand of her husband, "you were right. It is only in marriage that I could be happy. I could not have believed once that I would love like this; that I would not be able to live without you, darling! I imagined that love was a weakness."

She laughed with a little mocking, satisfied laugh. "It is the wealth of life, on the contrary. When I perceived that I loved you, oh! I had so many ideas

in my head that I didn't know what to do with them. Do you understand all that — you?"

"Oh! yes," said Ulric, seeking the lips of his wife. She shuddered, as if slightly oppressed.

"No, I pray you! When you kiss me it seems as if my heart stopped; if that should last I believe I would cease to breathe. Listen; let me tell you what I think."

She clung closer to him. He felt the tumultuous flutterings of the heart of his wife against his breast; then these beatings grew calmer, and at last very feeble.

"You will be gentle with me when I speak of Count Néoutof," she began to say. "You have no occasion to be jealous. Never was a father kinder to his child. Was it not delicate on his part to send me all these flowers of a young girl? Where is the image?"

She rose up a little, looking for it.

"In your room," replied Ulric.

"Go and get it, will you? Put it in a chair before us; there, like that. I can look now at the valley, and now at the image."

He obeyed, and returned with the wonderful *icône*, that sparkled in the rays of the moon as the diamonds had once sparkled on the desk in the room where Néoutof was left alone.

"Thanks; I am perfectly happy," she said, resuming her place on her husband's breast when he returned to her, "only I am very weary."

Her soft, feeble hands slid down into the folds of

her long wrapper of white wool, very like the dress of a nun. She had taken a fancy to these full, simple costumes at the convent.

"You need to sleep," said Ulric, kissing her hair near her face. "Come!"

"In a moment. I am so weary. I haven't strength to go even to my bed."

"I will carry you."

"Wait a little. How white everything is out-of-doors! A little mist rises from the torrent; the valley looks as if it was covered with muslin."

Ulric looked out. The night was perfectly clear. No fog tarnished the splendor of the rocks sparkling with mica.

"Ulric," said Cleopatra, with a voice still feebler and as if half asleep, "I don't know why I loved you; your eyes took my heart from me Easter night. It was a beautiful night, but this is more beautiful."

"Come!" said her husband, very low.

He laid his face close to hers, that was so beautiful at that moment beneath the magic glory of the moon.

"Yes," she murmured, still lower.

He bent down to lift her in his arms; she raised hers, and passed them around the neck of the young man. He kissed long and softly the half-open lips. She did not shudder this time. He was going to raise her up, when she said: —

"Again!"

Her voice was only a breath. He kissed her

quickly, ready to carry her away. She uttered a feeble sigh, and Ulric felt her arms loosen around his neck, growing heavy.

"Cleopatra!" he cried, frightened.

She did not reply, and her arms fell lifeless. He ran to the bell; lights were brought; Ulric seized his wife in his arms and carried her to their nuptial room.

She was dead.

The maiden flowers that Néoutof had sent were spread upon her shroud. Dressed in her soft, white wool robe she was placed in her coffin, and Ulric bore her away with him to his Swedish home, which he never left again.

Some pretended that he became insane, but no one knew; if so his insanity was harmless, for he spent all his earthly wealth in works of charity.

The news of this sudden death astonished everybody except the Grand Duke Boris and Néoutof. It was known that Cleopatra was ill, but not so ill as to die the evening of her marriage.

"It is not at all the thing to do," said Irene. "It is still more improper than all the rest."

This was, moreover, the opinion of some other judicious people.

Néoutof was not amazed. At that age one is scarcely capable of entertaining the sentiment of surprise, but he was struck down. When they brought back to him the *icône* that he had sent Cleopatra he did not manifest any grief. Simply

he had it placed before his bed at night and on the table during the day.

"See how this old man clings to his precious stones!" said some indifferent persons.

But he did not watch it very long, for he died in less than a month from the gout, that had reached his heart.

The Grand Duke Boris also received a funeral souvenir. One day in winter, the book of the Gospel, given to Cleopatra Bakhtof, was returned to him.

"That did not bring happiness upon her," thought the grand duke, running through the leaves of the sacred book.

"'My kingdom is not of this world,'" he read, stopping at a page that had been read perhaps more frequently than any other.

He meditated a moment, then, looking out the window, where large flakes of snow were falling and piling up against the panes, "Her tomb is beneath the snow," he said; "it is a virgin shroud, which will last her until spring-time. She did not believe she was made to love: she was right, for love killed her."

And the snow continued to fall, smooth, white, and supple, like the winding-sheet of wool in which Cleopatra slept.

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